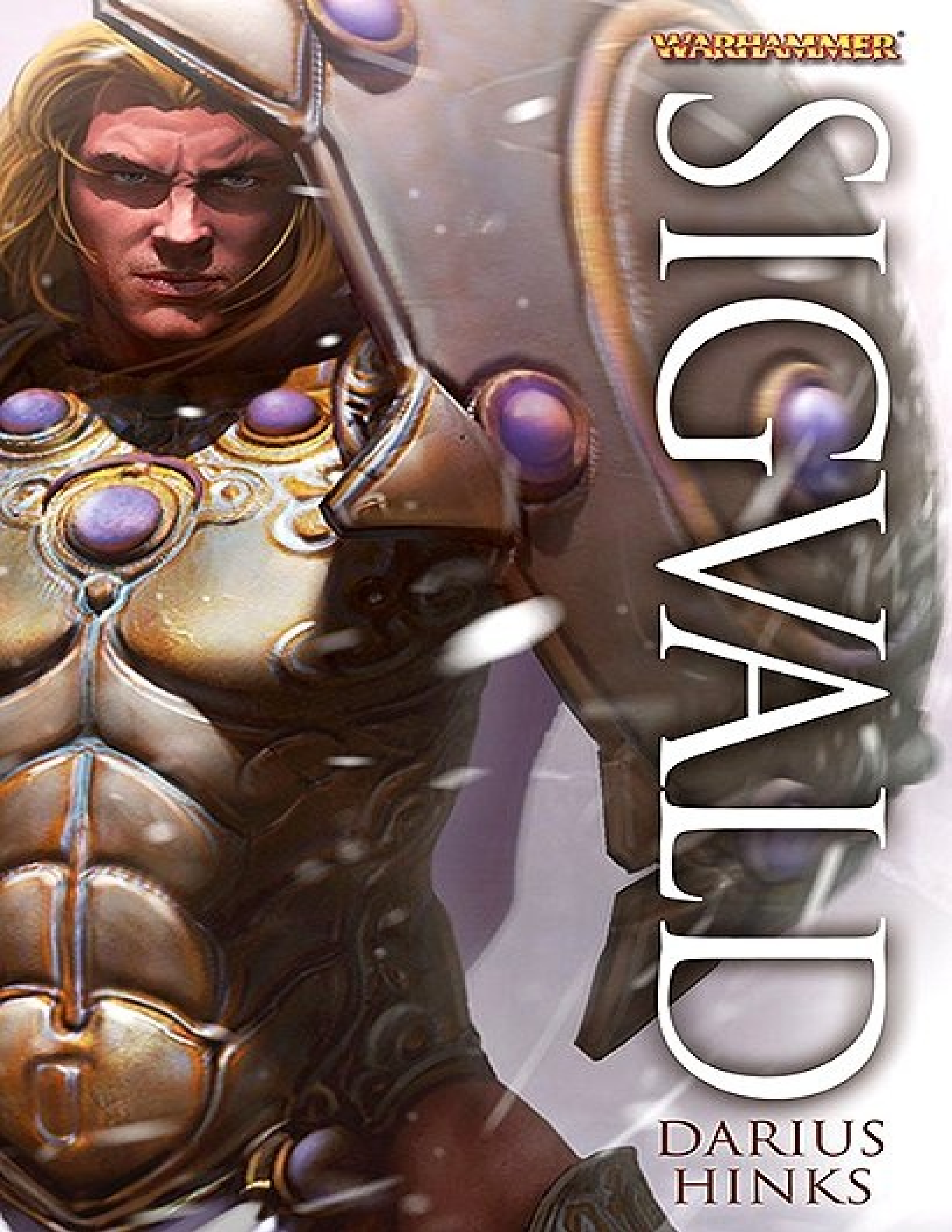


The cover art features a close-up of a warrior's face and upper torso. The warrior has long, flowing blonde hair and a stern, determined expression. He is wearing ornate, golden-brown armor with intricate designs and several glowing purple gemstones or lenses integrated into the chest plate. A large, curved, metallic object, possibly a sword hilt or a piece of machinery, is visible behind him, also featuring purple glowing elements. The background is a soft, hazy mix of light and dark tones, suggesting a battlefield or a mystical environment. The overall style is highly detailed and dramatic, typical of Warhammer fantasy art.

WARHAMMER

SIGMAR GUARD

DARIUS
HINKS

A WARHAMMER NOVEL

SIGVALD

Heroes - 04

Darius Hinks

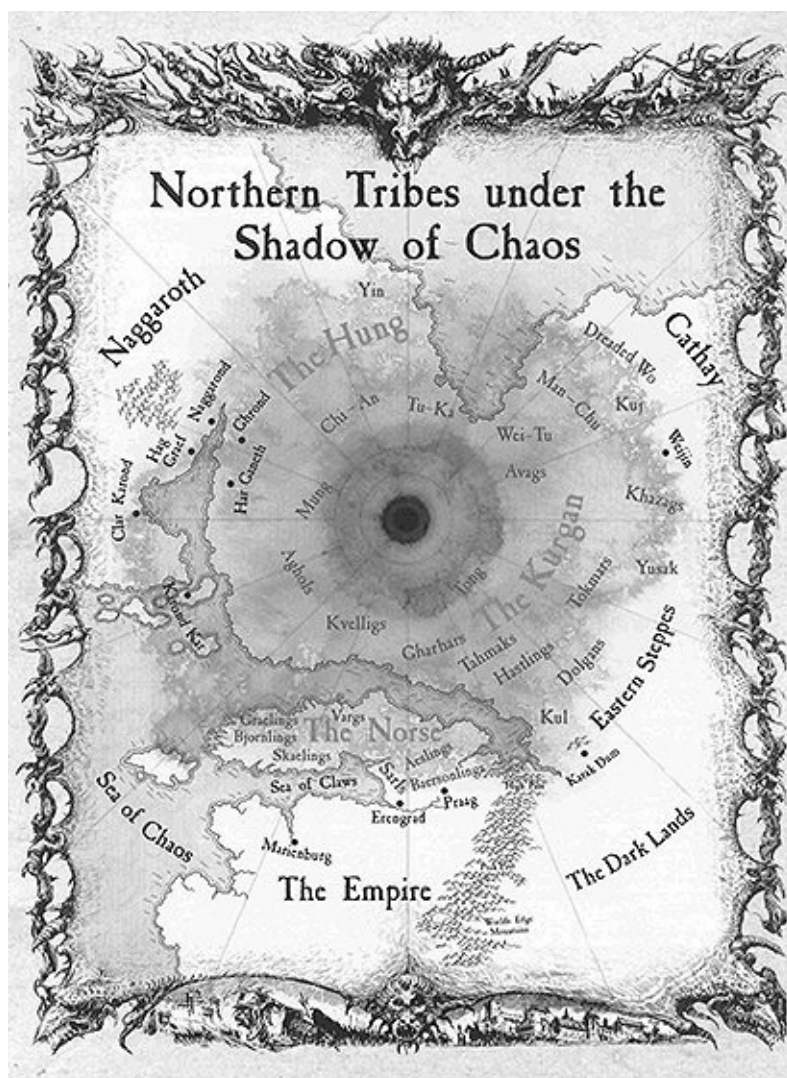
(A Flandrel & Undead Scan v1.0)



This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl-Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.



CAST OF CHARACTERS

The Decadent Host

Prince Sigvald the Magnificent

A champion of Slaanesh

Freydís

Sigvald's wife; Princess of the Gilded Palace

Oddrún (Narrerback)

Chancellor of the Gilded Palace

Baron Gustav Schöler

A proud Empire knight, recently arrived at the Gilded Palace

Doctor Rusas Schliemann

Formerly an Empire scholar, now a devotee of Slaanesh

Ansgallür the Famished

Freydís' guardian

Víga-Barói

A captain of the Decadent Host

Hazül

Víga-Barói's chief surgeon

Brother Bürmann

Víga-Barói's mute slave

Énka

Sigvald's most powerful sorcerer

The Fallen

Hauk

Chieftain of a Norscan tribe called the Fallen

Sväla the Witch

A Norscan queen and prophet (wife of Hauk)

Svärd

A young Norscan tribesman (Hauk and Sväla's son)

Valdür the Old

An elderly Norscan tribesman (Hauk's oldest friend)

Ungaur the Blessed

A Norscan shaman and religious rival of Sväla

Rurik Iron Fist

Chieftain of the Drekar tribe

Halldórr the Black

A Kurgan chieftain

Sturll the Hearer

A Norscan chieftain

Lørdén

A Norscan scout

Æstrid

A young Norscan woman

Ürsüla

An elderly Norscan witch

Völtar the Wolf

A deity worshipped by the Fallen

Others

Mord Huk

A champion of Khorne, with the head of a ferocious hound

Olandír

The lone inhabitant of a remote island off the coast of the Chaos Wastes

Belus Pül

A daemon of Slaanesh

Einvarr

Belus Pül's envoy

Galrauch

A two-headed Tzeentchian dragon

Bargau the Soulless

An ancient immortal from prehistory



PROLOGUE

A man emerged from the shadows, his bulky frame silhouetted by the glow of a single candle. As the light danced around him it revealed other shapes: the walls of a small hut hung with animal bones, scraps of parchment scattered across the ground, and, in the centre of the room, a pale corpse, strapped to a sacrificial stone and scored with dozens of precise, angular knife wounds. The body was surrounded by a fan of sparkling crimson as its blood drained down a network of narrow channels, before pattering into a collection of hammered brass cups.

“I’ve given you our bravest,” grunted the man, waving at the body and staring into the darkness. His voice sounded harsh and strange, as if there was something metallic in his mouth, and as he turned towards the candlelight, it revealed a snarling wolfskin, draped over his head. “Now will you speak?”

There was no reply. The only sound came from the blood, splashing into the cups.

The man rose up to his full, impressive height and kicked one of them across the ground, filling the chamber with noise and splattering blood up the wall. “What’s the answer?” he cried, pounding his fist on the corpse’s chest.

Still there was no reply and the man cursed, dropping a long, curved knife to the ground as he turned to leave.

Only then did he notice the wall. The blood he had kicked from the cup was forming itself into shapes as it trickled downwards, scrawling words across the ancient stone.

He gasped and stumbled to a halt. Then he grabbed the candle and held it

up to the glistening characters. His eyes widened in recognition as he realised it was a fragment of an old saga.

He leant closer and began to read.

*Across the ice,
through the snow,
a Geld-Prince,
swaddled in lust.*

He cursed again and smeared the blood across the wall, frantically wiping his palms over the uneven stone until every trace of the words had been obscured.

For a few seconds he stood in silence, trembling and glaring at the bloody rock. Then he muttered a single word, his voice full of fear.

“Sigvald.”



CHAPTER ONE

Far in the distance, beneath the grumbling black belly of the sky, a triangular star had appeared. It had not been visible from the other side of the valley, but now it was unmistakeable: a glittering bauble, hung low over cruel, magisterial peaks. The baron massaged his sunken cheeks and leant forward in his saddle, peering out across a vast, frozen lake, hypnotised by the flickering light. For nearly three months he had led his men north, into regions of madness and endless night, and all the time, his determination had been ebbing away—leeches out of him by the appalling visions he had endured. Now, with fewer than six hundred men left and his body ruined by starvation and cold, he wondered if his mind had finally gone. There were no stars in the Shadowlands, only eternal darkness. Yet, when he rubbed his eyes and looked again, the light was still there, taunting him.

He looked down at his wasted limbs and asked himself if, even now, he might find what he came for. “Could this be hope?” he whispered.

He pointed the light out to his men and they nodded weakly in reply, steering their dying horses after him as he clattered across the ice.

The soldiers climbed the other side of the valley and after a while they realised it was not a star at all. They shook their heads in wonder as they saw that the light was a beautiful castle, hanging impossibly in the sky. The building flashed and glittered in the moonlight as immense banks of snow spiralled around it. It was made entirely of gold.

The baron urged his horse to pick up its pace, but then, with the building just half a mile away, he hesitated. He saw it quite clearly now: a vast, domed

palace, drifting on the icy breeze and defying all laws of logic. He shook his head, still doubting his eyes. Even on the ground it would have seemed a miracle: a bewildering forest of turrets and towers, peopled with armies of leering grotesques. The scale of the construction was unbelievable. Every soaring pinnacle was succeeded by an even taller spire, until the eye grew utterly bewildered and returned, exhausted, to the huge front gates. A broad stair swept down from the palace in great serpentine curves, resting on the snow like the stem of a colossal gold flower.

The baron dragged his gaze from the fantastic building as one of the other riders called out to him. The snowdrifts nearby had gathered into jagged shapes, like sheets draped over a corpse. He signalled for his men to investigate and, despite their obvious fear, they dropped from their horses and struggled awkwardly through the snow. Upon reaching the mounds they began to dig, using swords drawn from within their oiled cloaks. The men gasped as they revealed a block of dented gold. Avarice gave them strength and within minutes they had uncovered a toppled statue. Like the palace hanging over them, it was cast entirely in gold, but it was not the lustre of the metal that took their breath away, it was the artist's subject. The statue portrayed a young man, a noble, clad in plate armour and roaring with laughter as he pointed up towards the palace. The face was so handsome and full of joy that the men lowered their swords and backed away in awe. Dents and scratches covered the metal, but the statue's eyes shone with vitality and humour. A lusty energy poured out of it. The men had never seen such a blissful, beautiful image of fulfilment. As they studied the lines of the face they found themselves grinning idiotically.

For a few moments the baron was silent, staring at the statue with the same inane expression as the others. Then he shook his head, closed his mouth and waved at the other shapes. His men rushed to obey and soon uncovered dozens of identical statues, all laughing and pointing towards the palace. They had all been toppled, like the first, and some had clearly been attacked—limbs and even heads were missing in some cases—but all of them were beautiful. Faced with these smiling, divine figures, the baron overcame his doubt and dismounted, marching through the snow towards the floating palace.

The other soldiers followed suit, tethering their horses to the foot of the stair and climbing after the baron with dazed, gleeful expressions on their faces.

As his boots clanged up the gold stairs, the baron regained a little of his former strength and dignity. He dusted the ice from his beard and turned up the ends of his wide moustache. All trace of exhaustion dropped away from him as he followed the wide curves of the stairway. He did not seem to notice that the

steps were as dented as the statues; nor that many of them were slumped and buckled, without any sign of repair.

There was a screech of grinding metal. The baron looked up to see a door opening beneath a grand, latticed portico. At first it seemed as if the door had opened by its own volition, but as he and the other soldiers reached the top steps, they saw a group of figures marching out to greet them. The baron's eyes glittered with excitement as twelve gleaming knights clattered out. They wore sculpted purple armour and each of them carried a sword and a circular, mirrored shield. They were almost as dazzling as the statues: tall, fair and perfectly poised as they formed a phalanx in front of the door.

Then the baron's smile faltered. He dropped a hand to his longsword as a robed figure stooped beneath the doorframe and lurched out into the moonlight. The knights were all over six feet, but the hooded figure that followed them was half as tall again. Even its great height did not seem to tell the whole story: its dirty, hessian robes were stretched over long, knotted muscles and a humped, ridged back. It resembled a sack, filled with long sticks and animated by an invisible puppeteer, who steered it clumsily towards the riders, keeping its head down and its face hidden in shadow.

The baron stood proudly to attention, signalling for his men to do the same.

The giant lumbered towards them and came to a halt a few feet away. As it loomed over him, the baron noticed dozens of tiny shapes, scurrying beneath its robes. The sound of laboured breathing came from within the folds of its hood, followed by a low growling noise. It seemed as though the thing were trying to speak.

"I'm Gustav Schüler," said the baron, thrusting out his stiff beard and pulling back his shoulders. He looked like a reanimated corpse. His blistered skin was stretched horribly over his protruding cheekbones and his lips were cracked and blue, but the baron carried his breeding like a badge of honour. He strode through the snowstorm, determined to appear undaunted. "I demand entry."

Another stream of rasping vowels emerged from within the hood.

The baron shook his head impatiently. "I can't understand." He turned to the stony-faced knights. "I can't understand him. Is he a daemon? Are you all daemons?"

The knights gave no response. In fact, they did not even seem to see the baron, so he turned once more to the hooded giant, raising his voice even louder in an attempt to be heard over the wind. "Can you understand me?" His voice was edged with fury as he stepped closer. "We're dying. We have nowhere else

to go.”

The hooded giant looked down at him in silence for a few seconds, swaying slightly, as though struggling to balance on its long, crooked legs. Then it spoke again. The words were still little more than a guttural snarl, but they were now in a language the baron could understand. “Then you have my pity,” it said, slumping to one side and waving the baron towards the open door.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said the baron as he limped down a vast hallway. The long journey north had replaced several of his toes with blackened stumps, and every step sent needles of pain into his feet, but the grandeur of the architecture drew him on. The vaulted ceilings were so high that he could barely make them out in the torchlight. If it wasn’t for the distant glitter of ribbed gold, he might have been walking through the night sky. The giant gave no reply as it led the baron onwards. This was the fourth long hallway they had passed down, and it had maintained a stony silence every step of the way. They were utterly alone and the baron burned with questions.

“What about my men?” he asked. The baron had allowed the knights to lead his exhausted soldiers away without a word of protest. It had seemed quite natural to entrust his men to such noble guardians, but now, as his thoughts began to clear a little, he felt a terrible rush of guilt. What had he been thinking? He looked anxiously over his shoulder but could see no sign of the entrance.

The giant still gave no reply and the baron shook his head, ashamed at how easily he had been distracted. “What could I have done?” he muttered, tugging anxiously at his beard and stumbling to a halt. “There’s no fight left in any of them. They’re at death’s door.” As he looked up at the faded grandeur of the palace, he realised that whatever happened now, all of their fates were in the hands of its master. He must be either saviour or executioner, for all of them.

The baron hurried on, shaking his head in disbelief as he left the first building and approached another. Rather than being just one palace, as it appeared outside, he now saw that this was a collection of palaces, each larger and grander than the one before. The further he went though, the harder it was to ignore the decay: the buildings seemed abandoned. This far in there was no trace of a breeze and a thick layer of dust had settled over the gold, painting everything a maudlin grey. Mirrors as tall as trees lined the walls, but many of the gilt frames were broken and great cracks had spread across the glass. Alongside the mirrors were huge portraits of the grinning figure whose statue the baron had seen outside. Each vast image portrayed the young noble as he overcame a series of monstrous foes, and each one was painted in the most

incredible, vivid colours. Decades of dust had settled over them, however, and the noble's face looked out from behind a curtain of cobwebs.

After an hour of marching in silence, the baron began to hear sounds. As he stumbled down another endless corridor he realised it was music. He tilted his head to one side and strained to hear more clearly. There were voices too, dozens of them, echoing around the soaring arches and columns. The hooded figure led him into another passageway. This one was markedly different: it was much smaller for a start—only wide enough to accommodate four or five men side by side—and it had clearly seen recent life. The mirrors that lined the walls were still clouded with ancient dust, but the carpet was indented with footprints. The heady scent of lilies filled the air and the baron sighed with pleasure as warmth began to seep through his furs. The music was now unmistakable and he paused to enjoy the sound of harps playing a sinuous, elusive melody. The voices were clearer too. The baron could not place the language, but the snatches of polite laughter brought a faint smile to his lips.

His hooded guide paused as it reached a final set of doors. It was obvious from the volume of the music that they had reached their destination. The giant placed a long, bandaged hand on one of the door handles and then hesitated, turning back to Schüler. After a few seconds of gasping and spluttering it spoke. "You may still leave," it growled, straining to wrap its thick accent around the words.

The baron scowled at the delay and gestured to the door.

For a long time, the figure studied the baron from within the deep folds of its hood, then, finally, it nodded and shoved the door open.

The baron stepped back with a gasp. The room beyond was a kaleidoscope of light and movement. Crowds of dancing figures were spinning back and forth through banks of scented smoke. He shook his head in astonishment. The dancers were dressed in iridescent silks and sparkling brocades, and moved with such grace that they seemed little more than smoke themselves. "So beautiful," he muttered, but he could not fully hide the tremor of fear in his voice. "What are they? Gods?"

The hooded figure shook its head. As it ushered him into the room there was a note of amusement in its voice. "No."

As the baron's eyes adjusted to the flickering light, he saw the room a little more clearly. It was an absurdly grand throne room. Tiered, scalloped balconies lined its walls and ranks of fluted columns divided it into a series of arcades. The walls and ceilings were made of polished white marble, crowned with elaborate, golden cornices and between each of the columns hung crystal chandeliers each

the size of a stagecoach and shimmering with hundreds of candles. The flames pulsated with a multitude of different colours, washing over the ranks of spinning figures and revealing the strangeness of their costumes: towering masks of plumed feathers and wings of scarlet silk, all trailing through the smoke in perfect synchronicity. Above them, the balconies were filled with crowds of musicians, playing instruments of such strange design that they looked more like elongated limbs than pieces of brass or wood. As the baron stared at the incredible scene, he realised that not all of the lights were fixed in one place: dozens of birds were flitting around the room, swooping and diving in frenetic bursts, and trailing tiny lanterns from their tail feathers.

Beyond the dancers, there was a raised dais and a throne. The room was so long and the smoke so thick that the baron struggled to make out the throne in any detail, but as the lights ebbed and throbbed, he saw that the chair cradled a slender figure, slumped idly in its deep cushions. He felt a thrill of excitement. This must be his host. Even with their faces hidden behind their masks, it was clear the dancers' gaudy display was intended for the amusement of this one person.

"Whose palace is...?" began the baron, but as he looked back, he saw that the hooded figure had disappeared. He scanned the crowds and saw its swaying shoulders a few yards away, stumbling in and out of the dancers. He moved to follow, but it vanished behind a wall of smoke and whirling silk. He shrugged and looked back at the distant throne. It was obvious whose palace this was.

Drawing himself erect, he strode confidently down the central arcade. As soon as he neared the other guests, he faltered. He felt as though he had entered a hall of mirrors. The figures' costumes were even stranger when seen close up: bestial masks leered down at him and serpentine limbs sprouted from beneath bodices and cloaks. He began to doubt if all of the strange shapes were even costumes at all, they seemed so horribly animated. But it was the size of the figures that finally brought him to a confused halt. Some of the dancers towered over him, like willows, while others scampered beneath his legs. He clamped his eyes shut and pressed his hands over them, trying to block out the torrent of warped faces and impossible shapes. Awful realisation washed over him in a dizzy rush. "How can they exist?" he groaned.

As he stood there, trembling with delayed shock, the baron felt something shift, irrevocably, in his mind. He shook his head and hurried on, trying to fix his eyes on the throne. As he rushed through the dance, delicate fingers brushed against his face and breathy, foreign voices whispered in his ears: urging him to join the writhing crush of bodies. An intoxicating mixture of terror and arousal

gripped him and he broke into a sprint.

With a sigh of relief, he reached the broad dais and stepped away from the dancers. A cerise carpet led up to the tall, baroque throne and, at its feet, a group of lithe, semi-clad figures were slumped in languid adoration of their monarch. The light here was a little clearer but the baron frowned, doubting his eyes. The figures that turned towards him had eyes as black as coal and flesh the colour of virgin snow. Their beautiful, elfin faces were full of mischief as they rose to greet him, with forked tongues flickering from their pouting lips. To his shame, the baron found himself smiling coyly as they pressed around him. He could not even be sure if they were male or female, but as their long, elegant limbs entwined him, he felt a fierce rush of lust. Gentle fingers traced over his blistered skin and the baron closed his eyes with a moan of pleasure. After months of brutal war, his body yielded gratefully to their tender embrace. Soft, moist lips brushed against his ears and warm, voluptuous bodies pressed against his hands.

The baron was finally defeated.

His legs gave way and he collapsed gratefully into a forest of welcoming arms.



CHAPTER TWO

“There will be time for introductions later,” said a soft voice.

At the sound of his own language, the baron felt a stab of guilt. He opened his eyes to see that he was still in the grand throne room. Then, with a gasp, he saw that his pale-skinned seducers were writhing over his body and eagerly unfastening his clothes. Their black eyes were rolling with excitement as their fingers pulled open his jerkin and slid across his exposed chest. He cried out in a mixture of ecstasy and alarm, suddenly realising how unnatural their beauty was. Some of their limbs ended in long serrated claws, and several of them had tails snaking down from their gyrating hips. He sat up with a groan of fear, shoving them away and looking around to see who had spoken. He saw a face utterly different from the ones nuzzling and mewling against his skin.

“You should meet your host before you sample his gifts,” said the man looming over him. His eyes were as hard as flint and his face was a mask of intricately scarred flesh. He reached under the baron and wrenched him away from the writhing nymphs.

The baron coughed with embarrassment and quickly fastened his jerkin. He felt colour rushing into his cheeks as he stood before a tall, stern-faced man. “I... I’ve travelled far,” he stammered, trying to ignore the pale fingers sliding up his legs. “I’m so tired. I just...”

The man nodded.

As he pulled himself free from the pile of bodies, the baron studied his saviour. He was dressed like a knight, or a noble of some kind. His broad,

powerful chest was encased in a plum-coloured cuirass of a strange, antiquated design and he carried an ornate helmet under his arm, designed to resemble the head of a serpent. His age was hard to determine, but the baron decided he must be at least fifty: he was tall and straight-backed and he had lifted the baron as easily as a child, but his oil-slicked hair was thinning and grey. His mouth was locked in a permanent sneer, twisted up by a thick worm of scar tissue.

“Are you from the Empire?” asked the baron, backing away from the knight’s fierce glare.

The knight frowned, as though annoyed by the question. Then he locked the baron’s arm in a tight grip. “Let me introduce you,” he said, speaking with a low, velvety voice that did not seem quite at home coming from such a cruel face.

He ushered the baron towards the throne and knelt down, indicating that the baron should do the same.

As the knight dropped to his knees, Schüler noticed that his purple cuirass was attached to his body by a collection of polished hooks, all of which were embedded deep in his flesh. As he leant forward, they tugged at his skin in a way that must have caused the man incredible pain and the baron grimaced in sympathy for his taut, mutilated skin.

“Sigvald, Lord of the Decadent Host,” the strange knight intoned, after briefly pressing his forehead into the deep carpet. “Your guest has arrived.”

The baron pressed his own forehead into the carpet and then stared at the figure slumped on the throne. It was a boy with the face of a god. He looked no more than sixteen or seventeen, and his posture was as slouched and nonchalant as that of any other teenager, but his face was divine in its perfection. The baron recognised him immediately from the statues and paintings. He had long blond hair and a handsome, strong face with piercing blue eyes and a cruel, sensual mouth. The youth’s muscular body was clad in ornately sculpted gold armour. It was filigreed and engraved with an intricate mass of whorls and arabesques and it was designed in such a cunning way that he seemed both ready for battle and barely dressed. His limbs were lithe and toned and where his skin was exposed it shone like the ivory on his throne. The baron felt both humbled and repulsed. He had never seen such a beguiling mixture of knightly perfection and vulgar, unashamed decadence.

The young prince did not seem to hear his knight’s words. His attention was fixed on an empty wine glass in his hand. He was peering intently at his own face, reflected in the faceted crystal.

“His guest?” whispered the baron, turning to the knight by his side. “You must be mistaken. I haven’t been—”

The knight silenced him with a sneer.

The baron felt a rush of indignation, assuming the knight disapproved of his earlier moment of weakness. He was about to repeat his excuse with a little more vehemence, when the prince looked up from his glass. His face crumpled into a petulant frown and he signalled for the purple-clad knight to approach. As the knight stepped to the prince's side the young regent spoke, but to the baron's dismay, the words were indecipherable. The prince's voice was gentle, but his language sounded like that of the shambling giant that had led him to the throne room. The baron shook his head in confusion. Then he realised that the words were not directed at him anyway. The prince was pointing to his reflection in the glass and asking the knight to examine his face. From the rising panic in his voice, it seemed as though he had spotted something terrible.

The knight stooped down by the prince's side and lovingly brushed the boy's flaxen hair away from his face. Then he peered closely at Sigvald's forehead, while the prince anxiously waited with his eyes closed. The knight laughed and plucked something from the prince's skin. He held it before up Sigvald's face and patted him reassuringly on the shoulder.

The prince scowled at the knight's hand, unconvinced. Then he leant forwards and looked back at his reflection. After a few more seconds of anxious pouting, his expression softened and he slumped back in his chair with a relieved sigh. Then he seemed to forget all about the knight and continued studying himself in the glass.

"My prince," said the knight, gesturing to the baron. "Your guest has arrived."

Sigvald looked up at the knight with a confused frown. He shook his head and snapped something indecipherable.

The knight tried to twist his sneer into a smile and gestured again to Schüler.

Sigvald finally turned towards the baron. His frown vanished and a broad grin spread across his face, revealing a row of even, gleaming teeth. "The Southling?" he said, in perfect Reikspiel. "Why didn't you tell me, Víga-Barói?" His lethargy evaporated and his eyes glittered with excitement. He leapt from the throne and dragged Schüler to his feet, embracing him in a fierce hug. "How perfect you are!" he exclaimed, holding the bemused baron at arm's length to study him. Sigvald looked his guest up and down, taking in the ragged mass of his furs, the battered state of his weapons and the gaunt ferocity of his face. He let out a burst of rippling laughter and hugged him again. "Perfect!" he cried.

The baron felt a swell of pride and smoothed down his thick beard in an

attempt to look more worthy of Sigvald's praise. "My lord," he said, bowing again. "I had no idea you were expecting me. I didn't realise..." his words trailed off as the beaming prince hugged him again.

"You're everything I hoped for," said Sigvald, running a hand over the baron's weather-beaten face. "What a breath of fresh air," he waved dismissively at the figures gathered on the dance floor, "after an eternity with these fawning inebriates."

The baron looked down from the dais and realised that the crowd was now motionless. The musicians on the balcony had fallen silent and the whole room was staring up at him. Even in the shifting light, he could see the jealousy on their bizarre faces. He flinched under a tide of hatred and turned back to the prince, eager to say his piece while he had the chance. "I came here seeking aid, my lord." He lowered his voice to an urgent whisper and clenched his fists. "I need power. The Empire is in tatters."

Sigvald's only reply was a bemused smile.

A note of anger entered the baron's voice. "The Emperor is doing *nothing*. I've come all this way, hoping to find someone who has the guts to finally rid us..." his words faltered as he saw the incomprehension in Sigvald's eyes. He clamped his hands over his head, wondering if he had made a terrible mistake. Then he waved back across the throne room to the crowds of figures. "Are these..." he paused again, unsure how to describe them. "Do you have an army, my lord?"

Sigvald's grin broadened, as though the baron had made a great joke. "Armies? Really, why would you talk of such things?" He gestured to the glittering columns that surrounded them. "Look at where you are." He leant close to the baron, his voice trembling with suppressed laughter. "You've escaped all that tedium, my friend. Don't you see? You're finally, utterly free. You've emerged from a dusty, life-crushing cocoon." He narrowed his eyes, and looked around suspiciously at their mute audience. "Think about it," he whispered, with a sudden urgency in his voice. "You've escaped from a *cocoon*." He looked down at his hands, grimacing as though he could see something unpleasant in his palms. "A cocoon."

As Sigvald stared at his hands his look of disgust grew until he was grimacing and shaking his head. Then, as suddenly as it came, the suspicion fell from his face and he looked up with another broad grin. "All you need do now is spread your wings!" He turned to the sneering knight. "Víga-Barói," he snapped, "this is a welcome party, not a wake!"

"My prince," replied the knight with a nod of his head. Then he gestured to

a distant balcony. At his signal, the musicians launched into a raucous, lurching tune and, with a rustle of taffeta and chitin, the dance was resumed.

As music filled the room once more, Sigvald continued to smile, nodding excitedly at the baron. "The party is in your honour, my brave friend. We receive so few visitors up here at the edge of the world. Fewer than few. Fewer than none." He giggled. "Not many have the courage to make it this far." He grabbed the baron's hand again and pulled him close. "You must have a great fire in you. A *great* fire." He looked up as a bird glided overhead, lighting up their faces with its lantern. Sigvald watched it darting back and forth for a few moments, entranced; then he looked back at his guest with a confused laugh. "Who are you, friend?"

"I'm a baron," Schüler replied, looking a little dazed. "Baron Gustav Schüler, that is. I've travelled north, from the Empire. I'm from a great city, called Altdorf." He looked down at the tattered red and blue heraldry on his armour as though it were more outlandish than anything he had seen so far. A note of disbelief entered his voice. "Or, at least, I was,"

"Schüler, Schüler, Schüler of the Empire," sang Sigvald, ignoring the baron's grim tone. "Tonight we will celebrate your escape!" The prince leapt up onto his throne, threw back his mane of hair and raised his glass to the distant vaulted ceiling. "Schüler of the Empire! Born again, at the end of the world!" Then he dropped down from the throne. His face was flushed with emotion as he grabbed a bottle of wine from the floor and filled the glass. "Drink, Schüler!" he cried, thrusting the glass into the baron's hand. "Drink, drink, drink!"

The baron looked hesitantly at the wine and then down at the writhing shapes at his feet. The pale figures had hacked away as soon as Sigvald had spoken to him, but as he lifted the glass to his lips, they purred expectantly and edged closer—smiling lewdly and caressing each other in anticipation. For a second he considered downing the wine. How easy it would be to abandon himself and forget everything. He was so tired and hungry, just a few mouthfuls would be enough and his body ached at the memory of their skilled caresses. Then he straightened his back and shook his head, lowering the wine without tasting it.

"Prince," he said, grimacing at the semi-clad shapes. "I came here seeking strength, not oblivion."

The prince followed the direction of his gaze and frowned in confusion. Then he smiled and took the glass back, draining it in one thirsty gulp. "Forgive me, Schüler," he said, taking the baron's hand again. "I'm so pleased to see you, I'm forgetting myself. You must be exhausted, and famished. Let me take you to

your rooms and find you some food. Once you're rested, we can discuss your needs." He turned to the murmuring shapes lying around them and gave them an indulgent smile. "But don't be cross with my pets." He knelt down and held out his hand. They rushed forwards and nuzzled against him: pressing their nakedness against his polished armour and licking his outstretched fingers with black, serpentine tongues. The prince smiled at their embrace. "They wish only to give pleasure, Schüler," he said, placing a lingering kiss on the nearest one and rising back to his feet. "We should begin. There's so much to see."

He turned to the knight in plum-coloured armour. "Víga-Barói," he said, addressing him in softer tones than before. "Perhaps it would amuse our guest to speak to one of his own countrymen? Find Doctor Schliemann and ask him to meet us in the library."

The taciturn knight gave a nod and marched stiffly from the dais, quickly disappearing into the crush of dancing figures.

"Now," said Sigvald, leading the baron in the opposite direction, behind the throne towards the back of the chamber. "Where's my chancellor?" As he led Schüler away from the dance, he paused and looked around with a hint of anxiety. "Oddrún," he called, peering into the flashing lights. "Are you there?"

There was no reply, so Sigvald let out a grunt of disapproval and continued leading the baron towards a door at the back of the throne room. As they reached the door, a tall shape loomed out of the shadows and stooped down to open it for them. Moonlight rushed in and revealed the huge, teetering giant.

"There he is!" said Sigvald, with a grin. "Old Narrerback himself. This is my chancellor, baron—Oddrún is his real name. See how well he anticipates my needs."

Even in his confused state, the baron realised how incongruous Oddrún's appearance was. The throne room was a menagerie of outlandish creatures but they were all elegant in their strangeness. The prince's chancellor wore filthy, shapeless rags, and even they could not disguise the clumsy nature of his anatomy.

The prince seemed blind to his chancellor's ungainly movements and grabbed one of his elongated hands. "We have a guest, Narrerback," he said. "A brave knight of the Empire. He's travelled all this way to find us."

Oddrún nodded. "I've prepared a room."

"Of course you have, but I have things to show him. So, so many things." The prince ushered Schüler through the doorway into a small, enclosed courtyard. Stars wheeled overhead and a column of snow shimmered in the moonlight. "Quickly," said Sigvald, hurrying across the flagstones to one of the

doors that led back into the palace.

They passed through a gloomy antechamber and into a room that was swathed in darkness. It was obvious from the echoes of their footfalls that it was another vast chamber, but the baron could see nothing.

“Oddrún,” came the prince’s voice out of the darkness. “Lights.”

There was snuffling, gasping sound and then, after a few minutes, a torch erupted into flames overhead, lighting up the chest of the hooded giant. “This room is no longer used, prince.”

“Of course it is!” Sigvald shook his head, snatched the torch from Oddrún’s hand and dashed away into the shadows. As he moved back and forth, light flared from rows of gas lamps that lined the walls, gradually revealing thousands of books. “My library!” cried Sigvald, grinning back at the baron. “It’s perfect. It’s complete. Nothing like it exists anywhere.” He lifted the torch in his hand and revealed countless gilded spines, stretching up towards the distant ceiling. “Even your Imperial scholars would weep to see such a collection, wouldn’t they?” He looked eagerly to the baron for confirmation, his grinning face elongated by the torchlight.

The baron frowned in confusion. “Why are you showing me this, my lord? I’m not a scholar, I’m a soldier.”

Sigvald laughed. “I’m going to show you everything, baron.”

As the baron spun around to take in the enormity of the library, a wave of nausea washed over him and he stumbled back against the door frame. The combination of exhaustion, hunger and confusion collided in his fevered brain. He grasped his head in hands.

“My prince,” grunted Oddrún, gesturing to the baron’s obvious distress. “The palace is vast and the baron is exhausted.”

Sigvald’s face twisted into a pout. “Of course,” he said, with a note of irritation in his voice. “We can begin in the morning.” He ushered the baron towards Oddrún. “Take him to his room. Give him a sample of Prince Sigvald’s hospitality.”

As the chancellor led the baron away, Sigvald looked around at the library. His look of annoyance vanished as he studied the books. “Perfect,” he muttered, running his fingers across some of the spines and tracing the shapes of the foiled letters. A small piece of foil came away in his fingers and he peered at it, spellbound by the glittering shard of gold. “Perfect,” he said again, holding it up into the light.

“My lord?” came a voice from the doorway.

Sigvald turned to see a frail, bespectacled old man. The combination of his

bony limbs and large, hooked nose gave him a distinctly avian quality as he scuttled into the room. He followed the prince's gaze to the books. "Were you after a particular volume, Geld-Prince?"

Sigvald placed the piece of foil carefully on a bookshelf and strode over to the old man. "Doctor Schliemann," he cried, clasping his hand. "Our guest has arrived and he's a countryman of yours."

The doctor drew back in alarm.

"Calm yourself," laughed Sigvald. "He's not here for you." The prince led the old man back through the door and out into the snowstorm. As they crossed the courtyard, he cupped his hand around his mouth and yelled into the doctor's ear. "He doesn't realise it yet, but he wishes to join us."

The old man nodded. "Ah, I see. Of course." He paused for a moment and turned to Sigvald, grimacing as the icy wind lashed against his face. "As long as you're sure. Not everyone is so understanding as you, my lord." He wiped the snow from his spectacles and peered myopically at the prince. "Few of my kinsmen approved of my methods."

"Don't worry," replied Sigvald patting the doctor on the shoulder. "He's not here to judge us. He's here to become one of us."

They stepped back into the warmth of the throne room and Sigvald let out a sigh of pleasure. The rows of plumed dancers had formed a circle around a lone figure: a tall, frail woman, dressed in shimmering silver robes who was singing along with the music. Her body was horribly emaciated and she barely looked strong enough to stand, but her aria was filled with such heartbreak that every one of Sigvald's subjects had stopped to listen.

"How beautiful," said Sigvald.

Doctor Schliemann nodded his head quickly, looking even more bird-like. "Yes, it's one of the elves we captured last year. In fact, I believe she's the last."

"The last?"

Schliemann shrugged. "I did everything I could to make them comfortable, but imprisonment is hard on such a proud race. Despite the best efforts of your surgeons, most of them simply wasted away. We forced some of them to eat, but they died anyway."

Sigvald climbed the steps towards his throne so that he could see the singer more clearly. "What noble creatures." He frowned. "What song is this, though? I've never heard any of them sing it before."

"I believe it's her death song. There are certain eleven melodies reserved for such occasions. They're a strange people—an odd mixture of pride and humility. She senses death approaching, but rather than pitying herself, she sings

of the tragedy of her race. The song's title is The Sundered."

Sigvald shook his head. "Incredible. Heartbreaking." He began to mouth the words of the song, savouring the delicate melody as it rolled around his mouth. It was a simple, three line phrase, repeated over and over. As he stared at the singer his eyes widened and the colour began to drain from his face. "It's too much," he gasped suddenly and rushed down the steps. With the doctor hurrying after him, he threw open a pair of doors and ran out onto a balcony. The snow was falling even faster now and as Sigvald leant on the railings he had to shield his eyes from the dazzling display. Towering columns of snow were spiralling across the ink-black sky, flashing and glinting in the moonlight and billowing out beneath the drifting foundations of the palace.

"Too much," repeated Sigvald looking out at the beautiful, brutal landscape. The sound of the music had followed them out and the combination of the melody and the tumbling snow filled him with passion.

"Do you need anything?" asked the doctor, lifting a small vial from his pocket and stepping to Sigvald's side.

"No, old friend," replied Sigvald with a high-pitched laugh. As he turned to the doctor, his mouth was trembling with emotion. He waved at the fury of the snowstorm. "Nothing. What more could I need? What more could anyone want? Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"

"No, my lord."

Sigvald noticed a trace of sadness in the doctor's voice and peered intently into his eyes. "What about you though, old friend—are you happy?" He placed a hand on the old man's back. "Have I given you everything you desire?"

The doctor leant out over the railings and gazed at the distant mountains. "Of course—you've been unbelievably kind to me. No one else would have allowed me to pursue such experimental research. Few people truly understand the necessity of sacrifice. I take no pleasure in inflicting pain, as you know, but it's essential if one is to fully comprehend the nature of the cosmos."

Sigvald nodded. "Absolutely. You've been utterly fearless."

Schliemann frowned and looked down at his bony, wrinkled hands. "My only hindrance now is my own flesh." He shrugged. "The years have not been so kind to me, my prince."

Sigvald saw the truth of Schliemann's words. Liver spots and wrinkles had marred the skin of his protégé. He looked Schliemann up and down and realised that his limbs were almost as frail as the elven singer's. The prince looked back out at the storm. Inside, the aria had reached a soaring crescendo. The supple elven words echoed out into the darkness, filled with longing and regret. The

sight of the snow, the sound of the music and the undeniable fact of his friend's mortality suddenly rushed through Sigvald like a drug. His head strained with a sadness so profound that it verged on euphoria. "Too much," he breathed as his heart began to pound. Painful as it was, he realised he wanted to savour this moment of transient, appalling beauty. Passion flooded his limbs and he began to tremble with excitement. As the dizzying emotions washed over him, Sigvald thought of a way to give them even greater potency. His hand was still resting on the doctor's back and with a quick shove, he sent the frail old man flying over the rails of the balcony.

The doctor tumbled out into the storm and plummeted into the void.

Sigvald leant out over the balcony to watch his descent.

As the doctor hurtled towards the snowy wastes below, Sigvald's face was gripped by a kind of mania and his mouth stretched into a horrible grin. The old man screamed as he fell beneath the floating palace. It seemed an infinity before his body finally smashed on the distant rocks below. Sigvald remained motionless for a few minutes—gripping the railings and staring down at the broken corpse. Then his smile turned into a grimace and he backed away from the edge with a groan, raising his hands to his face.

"My lord?"

Sigvald turned to see his chancellor, stooping through the doorway.

The hooded giant looked at Sigvald's anguished face and lurched to his side. "Prince?"

Sigvald kept his hands over his face and nodded at the balcony.

Oddrún rushed to the railings and looked out into the storm. At first he could see nothing and shook his head in confusion, then he looked down and gasped. "Who is... is that the doctor?"

Sigvald rushed to his side and looked down at the distant corpse. He was still clutching his face and his eyes were wide with grief.

Oddrún turned to face him. "Did he fall?"

Sigvald shook his head.

The chancellor slumped against the railings and groaned. "Doctor Schliemann? After all these years?"

Sigvald flinched as though he had been slapped, then stepped up to the railings.

As the last note of the elven song faded away, the giant and the prince looked down from the balcony, watching the snowflakes spiral endlessly into the abyss.



CHAPTER THREE

A flame was burning on the wind-blasted steppe. It was nearly dawn and as a line of tribesmen crossed the fields, the sky above them was slowly shifting from black to a deep indigo. There was something strangely heroic about the sight of a single fire beneath such a vast expanse of sky, and as the men formed a circle around the flickering light they were humbled into silence. The fire was housed in a brazier: a deep bronze bowl, hammered and scored to resemble the head of a giant wolf.

As the flames guttered and snapped in the brutal Norscan weather, a woman was attempting to guard them. She was dressed as simply as the tribesmen who gathered around her. A few crudely sewn animal skins were all that preserved her modesty, apart from a confusing mass of runes: hundreds of them, tattooed over her pale skin in dark, blue ink. As the wind howled around the brazier, she attempted to block it with her wiry body—dancing back and forth, silhouetted against the fire as she tried to keep it alive. Her right hand clutched an iron knife and her left was slick with blood. Every time the flames began to fail, she drew the blade across her palm and hurled her blood against the brazier, along with an oath. “Völtar the Wolf,” she cried, as her blood sizzled against the hot metal, “will bring him home.” Her voice was hoarse and her limbs trembled after a whole night of vigilance, but there was a grim determination in her eyes as she repeated the phrase.

“So this is all we needed to do,” said one of the tribesmen. He was the tallest of the group and clearly a figure of some importance—feathers and claws were wound into his long, red beard and he held an intricately carved staff in his

right hand. A grey wolf's pelt was draped over his head, so that its fangs hung down over his sneering face. "The Fallen are all but extinct, our hunting grounds have been stolen and our children are starving, but a bonfire will save us."

The crowd roared with laughter, but it was forced and self-conscious and they watched the woman closely for her response.

"Tell me, Sväla," continued the man in the wolf skin, "will your flames reach across the fields to consume our enemies, or will they leap from their flesh at your command?" He grinned at the crowd, reminding them all of how clearly the gods had favoured him: his human teeth had long ago fallen out, to be replaced by needles of black iron.

Sväla looked up from the fire and glared at him. "Jokes, Ungaur the Blessed? Is that all you have left to offer?" She looked around at the crowd. "He didn't seem so merry when Hauk asked him to join the raiding party."

"Your husband's a fool," said Ungaur, turning his black grin towards Sväla. "I warned him to wait for the new moon. The portents were clear. If he's not prepared to listen to the Voice of the Wolf then he can't expect my help."

Sväla laughed. Unlike the laughter of the others, hers was a clear, honest sound. "Your *help*, Ungaur?" She looked at the crowd with disbelief. "Has our shaman ever given us help with anything?"

The Norscans fell quiet and turned to Ungaur. Such open criticism of their shaman was unheard of, even from the chieftain's wife.

Firelight glinted in Sväla's eyes as she turned back to the brazier. "Other than butchering our finest warriors, of course. You've always been a great help there."

The shaman slammed his carved staff into the ground and his face flushed with rage. "What would you have us offer a god, Sväla? Goats? We're already cursed!" He stepped closer to the flames and pointed his staff at the stars. "We must regain Völtar's favour with human blood. The blood of heroes. It's the only way!"

Some of the crowd grunted their approval, but others seemed less sure and looked back at Sväla.

"What use have your sacrifices ever been?" muttered Sväla, flinging another splash of blood against the brazier. "You kill us, the other tribes kill us..." She turned back to the shaman. "Either way we die."

"Of course we do! We're *cursed*! The Wolf has forsaken us. Sacrifice is the only way to regain his forgiveness."

"Forgiveness for what?" Sväla raised her voice to the crowd. "Do any of you feel you need forgiveness? Why should we be labelled the Fallen? We

honour the gods. We face our enemies without fear. We offer up our dead to the Wolf. What have we done to deserve this curse?"

"Do not question the judgement of Völtar," cried Ungaur, looking up at the night sky. "Your lack of faith will bring even greater suffering down on our heads."

"Greater than this?" Sväla waved at the gaunt faces of the tribesmen. "We're dying, Ungaur, and none of your spells have done anything to help." She looked out across the steppe, towards a distant line of mountains. "Your prayers and oaths have failed. We need something better." She held out her arms to shield the fire. "We need victory."

Hauk loosed his axe and slipped silently through the long grass. He knew the end was only seconds away: victory or defeat, whichever awaited him. Shapes trailed after him through the darkness and he felt as though he had already entered the afterlife. His men looked pale and ghostlike as they followed him up to the summit of the hill. Their muscles gleamed in the predawn glow and as they raised a thicket of spears and axes over their heads, the pale light glinted along the rows of jagged blades. They reminded Hauk of vengeful spirits and he felt a fierce rush of pride. He mouthed a prayer to the gods. Any that would listen. Everything hinged on this moment and he no longer cared whose name fell from his lips. "We will be the Fallen no more," he whispered.

The warrior nearest to Hauk looked over and nodded. Valdür the Old had fought alongside his chieftain for three decades. He carried the same flashes of silver in his plaited topknot and the same scars on his knotted muscles. He heard the urgency in Hauk's voice and raised the shaft of his javelin to his lips, kissing the finger bones rattling around its tip.

Even before they reached the summit, sounds of battle reached their ears. The staccato war cry of the Fallen punctured the night, accompanied by the dull *crunch* of axes biting into flesh.

"Svärd," whispered Valdür, grinning at his chieftain.

Hauk nodded in reply and began to sprint up the hill.

A few moments later, they burst from the grass into a moonlit clearing and stumbled to a halt. Hauk lowered his axe and shook his head. They should have been charging towards the backs of their enemy. Hauk's son, Svärd, had volunteered to lead some of the men in a feint as Hauk led the true attack, but something was wrong. A circle of armoured, burly Drékar waited for them. The Norscans' grinning faces were smeared with their own blood and as they rushed forwards to attack they howled like starving dogs.

Hauk and his men barely had time to raise their weapons before they disappeared beneath an avalanche of flails and axes. Bones splintered and muscles tore as the two lines of men slammed into each other. War cries were replaced with curses, muttered oaths and garbled, liquid groans.

“Where’s Svärd?” cried Valdür as he hammered his fist into a screaming face.

Hauk roared with frustration and grasped the shoulder of the man he was facing. Rather than hewing his head from his shoulders, he slammed his foot into the man’s belly and, as he doubled over in pain, Hauk clambered onto his back to survey the battle. “Svärd,” he cried, scouring the heaving mass of bodies. The clearing was filled with movement as more of the Drékar rushed to attack, but there was no sign of his son. “I heard the wretched child,” gasped Hauk, swinging his axe down into the neck of the man who was supporting him. The tribesman collapsed and Hauk leapt clear, pounding the haft of his axe down into the face of another man as he landed. “Where is he?” he cried, peering through the forest of limbs and spears. “He signalled the attack!”

Fuelled by his rage, Hauk sliced his way through the enemy ranks, spitting and cursing as he went. Behind him, Valdür and the others fought on. After the initial shock of facing the Drékar head-on, they were now battling furiously. All of them had sensed their chieftain’s mood. It was clear this was no ordinary raid.

Hauk fought his way through the scrum of bodies and emerged on the far side of the clearing. His axe had broken in two and his rippling muscles were drenched with blood, but his face was still locked in furious snarl. “Svärd,” he roared, determined to discover why his son had failed him. A fist slammed into the side of his head and he rolled down the side of the hill, losing his shattered weapon as he fell. As soon as he could, he clambered back to his feet, raising his arm just in time to fend off another blow. He grabbed his attacker’s throat and squeezed. The Norscan’s windpipe crunched beneath his iron grip and Hauk tossed him aside with a grunt.

Then he paused.

Somewhere below him on the hillside, he could still hear the staccato war cry that had led him to attack. He squinted through the darkness at a group of shapes rushing through the grass. Rather than joining the fight, they were dashing back and forth beneath the boughs of a wide tree. Why had they signalled the attack without even reaching the enemy? “Svärd?” he grunted, staggering towards the shadowy figures. As he approached the group, Hauk began to recognise the faces of his men. Then he finally saw Svärd. He was preparing to launch a javelin at the tree.

“What are you doing?” cried Hauk, dashing towards his son. Then he gasped and stumbled to a halt. His men were not surrounding a tree. The tall shape he had seen was a living creature: a towering, hulking mockery of a man, with the horned head of an ox and four arms, each of which was thicker than Hauk’s chest and covered in filthy, matted fur. As Hauk edged closer he grimaced, realising that the monster had two mouths. As well as the gaping, slaverling jaws in its face, the thing had a long slitlike opening in its chest, lined with glistening fangs that had once been ribs. Two of its thick arms ended in bone blades that were smeared with the blood of Hauk’s men. As Svärd and the others struggled to fend off its thudding blows, the thing lurched back and forth, emitting a perfect imitation of their war cry.

Hauk cursed. He had been tricked. This grotesque monster had somehow been taught to mimic their attack signal. The Drékar must have bought its allegiance with the promise of human flesh. Hauk grabbed a spear from the ground and rushed to attack. “Bring it down!” he roared. “Bring it down!”

Sväla thrust her knife towards the grinning shaman. “Keep back, Ungaur,” she hissed.

“I have no quarrel with you, Sväla,” he replied, backing away from the brazier and speaking in a gentle whisper. “Hauk is to blame. He leads us to war against the will of Völtar. No wonder we suffer such bloody defeats. No wonder our lands have been stolen.” Ungaur ran his tongue across the black spines in his mouth. “No vigil could atone for such sacrilege. Nothing you can do can help him now. Even if your flame survives the night, Hauk will not.”

“The shaman’s right,” said another tribesman, stepping into the firelight. He waved at the scars that covered his weather-beaten skin. “I’m not afraid to fight. Or to die.” He nodded at the brazier. “But I won’t follow a chieftain against the will of Völtar. We must listen to Ungaur the Blessed. He is the Voice of the Wolf.”

“Then tell me: when did the wolf become a sheep?” cried Sväla, shaking her head in disbelief. “While we starve, the Drékar grow fat. They revel in our cowardice, along with all the other tribesmen who’ve turned their backs on us. Would you really let them pass through our lands—laden with the very food and gold we need? Your chieftain remembers his oaths, but he will not simply lie down and die when salvation is at hand.” The anger in Sväla’s voice was answered by a sudden blast of wind that flattened the flames to the base of the bronze bowl. She gasped and raised her furs as a shield. As the gust died down, she peered into the brazier.

The crowd pressed forwards, straining to see into the bowl.

“My husband still lives,” said Sväla, as a single flame lit up her face. “Völtar the Wolf will bring him home.”

The creature lashed out with its sharpened blades of bone. Each one dripped with venom and as they hacked into the Norscans’ flesh the men screamed in agony, clutching at wounds that immediately began to fester and bum. Hauk launched his spear with a howl, but the weapon bounced uselessly off the monster’s thick hide and fell to the ground.

A young, shaven-headed warrior sprinted through the moonlit grass to Hauk’s side. He was tattooed with tribal markings and his whole face was pierced with teeth: wolves’ canines that sprouted from every inch of his skin in a fierce display of self-mutilation. “Völtar forgive me,” he gasped, kneeling before the chieftain and letting his axe thud to the ground. His eyes were wide with panic. “That thing appeared from nowhere and began making the attack signal. There was nothing I could do.”

Hauk spat on the ground and signalled for his son to rise. “We cannot fail, Svärd,” he snapped. “*Everything* rests on this.” He grabbed the youth by his biceps and shook him like a child. “Don’t let me down, Svärd, fight! Then fight harder! We can’t return empty handed.”

Svärd nodded and regained a little of his composure. “What about the others?” he asked, waving up the hill.

Hauk grinned through bloody teeth. “Valdür the Old is with us. He’s leading the attack.”

“I knew it,” replied Svärd. “I knew he would see through Ungaur’s lies.” He lifted his axe from the ground and gripped it in both hands. “Then maybe Völtar *is* with us.” He nodded at the scrum of figures, trying desperately to bring down the lurching creature. “Let’s kill this thing, so I can go and see the old man in action.” He grinned back at Hauk, causing his chin to sprout a beard of yellow wolves’ teeth.

Hauk laughed as they ran towards the monster. “You may be young Svärd, but by Völtar you’re ugly.”

“And what will become of us now?” cried Ungaur, baring his black needles at the crowd. “Sväla’s beloved has not just thrown away his own life, he has thrown away ours too.” He waved his staff at the horizon. “He has taken our finest warriors to their deaths. Even Valdür the Old has fallen under his spell. So who will protect us? Who will safeguard our homes the next time we’re

attacked?” He turned back to the woman huddled over the brazier. “Hauk’s refusal to obey the will of Völtar has guaranteed our destruction, even you should be able to see that, Sväla.” He stepped closer, ignoring the knife she waved in his direction. “Maybe you think you owe him your loyalty, whatever the outcome?” He tried to hide his iron spines and adopt a concerned expression. “But I can assure you, he has not always shown such loyalty to you.”

Sväla hesitated and looked over at the shaman. “I don’t know what poison you’re trying to spread, Ungaur, but you might as well save your breath.” She turned back to the fire. “I realised a long time ago that your heart is as black as your teeth.”

Ungaur raised his eyebrows and shrugged. “There’s no poison, Sväla. It simply hurts me to see you risking the fury of Völtar, for a man who does not even respect the sanctity of your marriage.” As he finished speaking, Ungaur looked pointedly in the direction of a pretty young woman, standing just a few feet away.

Sväla lowered her knife and followed Ungaur’s gaze. The woman was her exact opposite: voluptuous, raven-haired and still in the first flush of youth, where Sväla’s own boyish frame was bony and scarred after a lifetime of hardship. “Æstrid? What are you saying? What about her?”

The girl blushed and turned away, smirking at the men stood nearest to her.

A wave of laughter rippled through the crowd.

“Do you see?” asked Ungaur, holding out an open hand to Sväla. “He’s lied to all of us, even you. Völtar has abandoned him and he’s even abandoned himself.”

Sväla was still staring at Æstrid. She shook her head and walked towards her. “I don’t believe it.” She sneered and waved her knife at the girl. “Hauk wouldn’t lower himself to *this*. What would he want with such a child?”

The young girl’s face coloured even darker and she glared back at Sväla. “What would you know about his wants, old woman?”

Sväla strode towards the girl and punched her square in the face.

Æstrid collapsed without a sound. Then she sat up and looked around in disbelief. She wiped her hand across her mouth and hissed as she saw it was smeared with blood. “You’re too senile to see the truth,” she spat.

The tribesmen gathered around, smirking and muttering lewd comments.

Æstrid climbed unsteadily to her feet and looked over at the shaman. He nodded at her and she reached down into her cleavage, drawing out an iron ring on the end of a leather strip. She squared up to Sväla. “If you know him so well, how do you explain this?”

Sväla drew back her fist to strike her again, then paused. “What is...?” Her words trailed off as she looked c loser at the ring.

Æstrid placed her hands on her hips and sniggered. “Recognise it? He *begged* me, Sväla. Begged me for a place in my bed. We did things you could never even dream of.” She held the ring up so that it glinted in the moonlight. “He knew he might die tonight and he wanted me to have this, as a mark of his love.”

Sväla grabbed Æstrid by her hair and yanked her to her knees. Then she pressed her knife to the girl’s throat. “You lie,” she said, but her voice trembled with doubt. “He would never give his wedding ring to a whore like you.” With a flick of the knife she sliced the cord from the girl’s neck and held it up for a better look.

“Go on,” hissed Æstrid, scrabbling away. “Take a good look.” She looked around at the crowd of leering tribesmen and laughed. “I don’t need a trinket to keep hold of a man.”

Sväla peered at the ring for a few seconds, still shaking her head in disbelief. Then she let out a strangled sob as she saw a small rune scratched into the metal. “It’s his,” she gasped.

Hauk shuddered as one of the claws closed around his body. As it gripped his flesh, it burned into him like a firebrand. He gasped at the pain, but did not lash out in defence. As the monster lifted him towards its chest he kept his spear gripped firmly in both hands and made no attempt to fight back. Beneath him lay dozens of his men. Those who were still alive were screaming in agony and clutching at their acid-scorched flesh. Svärd and a few of the others were hurling spears at the creature but they had barely managed to scratch its skin.

“Father!” cried Svärd as the creature lifted the chieftain above their heads.

Hauk howled as he felt his skin blister and bubble. It was not just the pain that made him cry out. From this vantage point he could see the battle on top of the hill. Valdür the Old was still leading the attack—Hauk could clearly see his silver-streaked topknot as he hacked and lunged through the melee—but things were not going well. The Drékar had completely surrounded his men and the Fallen were hopelessly outnumbered. “There shouldn’t be so many,” he gasped. “I’ve been tricked.”

Hauk had no more time to consider the fate of his men. A blast of warm, foetid breath washed over him and he turned to face the gaping chest mouth of the monster. As it opened wider to devour him, he saw a flaccid tongue that was bubbling with the same virulent substance that oozed from its limbs.

Still, Hauk held onto his spear.

“Father!” cried Svärd again, hacking uselessly at the monster’s cloven hooves. Another of the beast’s claws reached down and locked around his tattooed head, causing him to wail in agony.

As the monster thrust Hauk into its open jaws, the chieftain finally made his move. Just inches away from the creature’s teeth, he drew back his spear and thrust it into the thing’s trembling throat.

The monster loosed the men in its claws and reeled backwards with a piercing scream. Black acid poured from its chest and it lumbered back across the hillside, lifting the pitch of its scream higher and clutching desperately at the spear jammed between its yawning ribs.

Hauk dropped to the ground, rolled to a stop and climbed to his feet. His muscles were streaming with blood and acid but he remained silent as he tore off a strip from one of his furs and began wiping the poison from his body. As he removed the acid, it tore away the top layer of his skin, leaving behind an angry, raw mass of wheals and glistening sinew. “Use your rope,” he gasped to his men, trying to ignore the pain. “It’s dying. Lasso its legs.”

The men leapt to obey and easily brought the screaming monster to its knees. Once there, they lashed more ropes around its flailing limbs and staked it to the ground. Within a few minutes they had the thing trapped and began jamming their spears into its straining, thrashing bulk. The monster’s screams grew even louder as the Norscans levered open the mouth in its chest and plunged their spears into the soft flesh inside. The men forgot about their pain as they were consumed by a vengeful bloodlust. Even after the creature’s final scream, they carried on hacking and slicing at its steaming viscera.

“Stop,” called Hauk, pointing at their smouldering flesh. “Clean its blood from your bodies.”

The men backed away from the corpse and began sloughing off their blistered flesh, but Hauk did not give them long. He lifted an acid-scarred axe from the ground and let out a staccato war cry as he sprinted up the hill. “We’ve wasted too much time. We’ve Drékar to kill.”

They crested the brow of the incline and Hauk saw Valdür and his men, still fighting valiantly, despite the impossible odds.

“There are so many of them,” gasped Svärd, staggering up to his father’s side.

Hauk nodded, not even looking at his son. “The scout lied,” he muttered, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Lørden? Why would he lie?”

Hauk turned to look at his son and gasped. “Your face,” he said, grabbing the boy by his shoulders and pulling him close.

Svärd shrugged. Several of his piercings had been torn from his cheeks and his shaven head was blistered and bloody from the acid. “What of it?” he grinned. “It’s not as much of a mess as your chest.”

Hauk looked down and saw that the boy was right. In some places the acid had burned so deep that his ribs were gleaming in the moonlight. He shook his head and turned back to the battle. “Lorden must have lied. It’s the only explanation. Someone must have paid him to betray me. How else did they know we were going to attack? How else could they have tricked us into fighting that beast?”

Svärd frowned. “Who would have done that to us?”

Hauk shrugged and looked around. The survivors of Svärd’s group had all reached the top of the hill and assembled around him. “No matter,” Hauk said, lifting his axe aloft once more. “The more men there are to kill, the more gold we’ll find.” He levelled his axe at the struggling figure of Valdür and grinned. “If we’re not quick though, the old man will take it all for himself.”

With Hauk at their head, the men charged across the hilltop and tore into the backs of the unsuspecting Drékar.

The Fallen butchered several of the Drékar before they realised they were being attacked from a new direction. Valdür and his men let out a victorious roar as they saw their chieftain returning to the fight and pressed forwards with renewed determination. Attacked from both sides, the bloody-faced Drékar were soon penned in like sheep—struggling to raise their javelins and axes in the crush of bodies.

Hauk let out another staccato cry and it was answered by dozens of his men.

Just as Hauk was beginning to think victory was in reach, a tall figure shouldered his way through the carnage and slammed a fist into his face.

Hauk rolled across the ground and leapt back to his feet with a torrent of fresh blood rushing from his nose. The man who had floored him made an impressive sight. He was as broad and heavily muscled as all the other Norscans and every inch of his powerful frame was covered with bright red paint. Even his short crest of hair was dyed red. His only clothing was a loincloth and that was dyed the same colour. He carried no weapons, but his right hand was a mass of iron and scar tissue. Plates of jagged metal had melded with the Norscan’s flesh, replacing his fist with a crude, iron lump hammer. Only the man’s eyes showed a flash of white as he launched himself at Hauk.

“Rurik,” gasped Hauk, recognising the Drékar’s chieftain. He dodged the lump of bloody metal swinging towards his face and crouched low, punching his attacker hard in the stomach.

Rurik grunted and fell back into the crush of bodies.

Hauk strode forwards and raised his axe for the killing blow.

Sväla dropped to her knees and clutched the ring to her chest. “Hauk,” she whispered.

“He’s lied to us all,” said Ungaur, stepping closer and placing a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “There can be no other explanation. Why would he insist on leading us to these endless defeats when Völtar has warned him to bide his time? He must be worshipping some other master. He’s betrayed us for his own gain, Sväla.”

Sväla shook her head. “I can’t believe he would lie to me.”

Ungaur shrugged. “But you have the evidence in your hands. We all knew about his infidelity, but to be honest, it’s the least of his crimes.”

Sväla climbed wearily to her feet. With her certainty gone, her strength had vanished too. Suddenly she felt every minute of her night-long vigil. Her muscles burned as she looked past the crowd to the distant horizon. Dawn was finally rising across the fields, rippling over the swaying grass and transforming it into an ocean of gold. Sväla’s eyes were so full of tears that it took her a few seconds to notice the thin trail of smoke snaking up from the brazier.

She rushed over to the bronze bowl and peered inside.

The fire was out.

Hauk was dead.

Sväla howled at the sky. Her string of incoherent curses was so filled with despair that the other Norscans dropped the smirking expressions from their faces. They backed away, looking to the shaman for reassurance.

He grinned back.

Sväla’s screams formed into words. As she pounded her fists against the cooling metal she called on Völtar for aid, begging him to fill her body with power, or strike her down. The crowd watched with morbid fascination as Sväla’s face grew purple with rage and shame.

As Ungaur stepped towards her, Sväla’s eyes rolled back in her head and her limbs went slack.

She toppled unconscious into his waiting arms.

As Hauk swung his axe at the prone figure of Rurik he felt all the strength leech

out of him. Instead of slicing into his opponent's head, his axe slipped uselessly from his hands and thudded to the ground. For a moment, Hauk was unsure what had happened, then agony tore through his chest. He looked down to see broken ribs sprouting from a pulp of torn skin and muscle. He tried to cry out in pain, but hot blood filled his mouth.

As he dropped to his knees, Hauk found himself lacing a forest of kicking, struggling legs. He tried to rise, but the pain was unbelievable.

Hauk saw Rurik hold his bloody, metal fist up to the sky and roar victoriously at his men. Then the ground rushed towards him and he knew nothing more.



CHAPTER FOUR

Sigvald held his hands up before his eyes and smiled with satisfaction. The fingers were tapered, elegant and flawless. Or at least, *almost* flawless. He frowned and looked closer. It was hard to be sure in the flickering candlelight of the bedchamber, but he thought he saw a dark line running down one of his fingers. His pulse raced. Was it a vein? A dark, ugly, pulsing vein? He lifted his hand closer to his face and peered at it. The line was simply a trail of dried blood. And not even his own blood. He licked it from his finger, savouring the salty taste and sat back in his chair with a sigh of relief. Then he looked over at the bed. The baron was stirring. His frostbitten, skeletal head was rolling back and forth on the pillows and he was muttering under his breath—pleading with his god to forgive him.

“Baron,” whispered Sigvald, rising from his chair and moving closer. “Calm yourself. You’re safe now.”

Schüler opened his eyes to see Sigvald, sitting at the foot of his bed. “Prince,” he tried to say, but his mouth was clumsy with sleep. He rubbed his face and looked around at the room. It was an opulent jumble of gilt and lace, draped in the warm glow of a lantern, resting on a nearby desk. He tried to sit, but his bones cracked in complaint and he dropped back with a groan.

Sigvald gave him a warm smile. “Don’t exert yourself on my account,” he said, patting the baron’s leg. “You’ve slept for a long time. You should give yourself a few moments to compose yourself.”

Schüler grimaced as he noticed a large figure, waiting silently in a shadowy

corner of the room.

Sigvald followed his gaze. “Don’t be alarmed, it’s only Oddrún.” He summoned his chancellor over to the bed. “He thought I should let you sleep for another day, but I think you should eat something. You’re in profound need of nourishment, Schüler; more than any man I’ve ever met. And you must stretch your legs. I want you to be strong enough to enjoy tonight’s celebrations.”

Schüler dragged his aching body into a sitting position as the hooded giant shambled towards him and placed a tray on his lap. He massaged his forehead, clearly confused. Then his eyes widened in alarm and he sat bolt upright. “My men,” he gasped.

Sigvald laughed and rose to his feet. “You needn’t concern yourself with them, Baron Schüler. They’re being made *very* comfortable.”

The anxious expression remained on Schüler’s face as he slumped back into his pillows, but he was clearly too weak to argue.

Sigvald stepped up to the baron’s side and gripped his hand, studying his face. It was a taut knot of angular bones and scar tissue and there was a distinct edge of mania in his gaze. “They’re made of strong stuff, baron,” said Sigvald, with a kind smile. “As are you. And I’ve so much to show you. I hardly know where to begin.”

As Schüler looked at the prince his weariness faded a little. He wolfed down some of the food without even looking at it. Then his eyes widened and he looked down at the plate. The meal consisted of wafer-thin slices of pale, raw meat. He lowered his fork with a clatter and wiped a thin coating of blood from his lips. “What is this?” he asked, looking nervously at the red smear on his hand.

“Nourishment,” said Sigvald, with an odd smile. Then he shoved the tray aside and took the baron’s hand. “And there will be plenty more of that later. But now, we should explore. And talk.” He laughed. “I’ve been waiting for days to meet you and now I can’t think what to show you first.”

“How did you know I was coming?”

Sigvald’s smile broadened into a grin. “That can be easily explained. Let’s begin our tour with the Empyrean Dome.”

“Every particle in the cosmos is attracted and repelled by its companions,” said Sigvald, spinning on his heels and raising his hands to the vast, vaulted dome above their heads. “From the tiny pieces of matter that make up your flesh, to the distant flaming luminaries that trail across the night sky, everything is in constant motion. Movement is the key, baron, in everything. Do you understand? Stasis is

the only real danger to any of us—stasis and boredom.”

The baron was leaning heavily on a walking cane and staring up at the ceiling. His jaw was hanging open with awe. All around him, a broad circular chamber was slowly rotating. There were no torches on the walls but the room was ablaze with light. Hundreds of shafts of moonlight were refracted through lenses housed in the marble floor and, as the room slowly span, they traced a complex series of trajectories across the huge curved ceiling.

As Sigvald strode between the columns of light his excited face flashed in and out of view. “As the Empyrean Dome spins on its axis, it paints a perfect picture of the heavens.” He waved at the circles of light moving over their heads. “See how accurately they follow their allotted paths.”

Schüler peered up at the lights and saw that they were indeed following an incredibly complex series of arcs and parabolas, all painted across the indigo plasterwork in delicate gold leaf. As he looked closer, he saw that each glinting line was surrounded by beautiful astrological images and annotated with fine gold script. “What language have you used?” he asked. “I can’t read it.”

“Language?” said Sigvald, with a sudden rush of annoyance. “What difference does the language make? Why would you want to read it?” He jabbed his finger at the intricate frieze. “Look at it! Look how beautiful it is.”

Schüler tugged his ragged beard as he limped into the centre of the room, extinguishing and reigniting stars as he stepped across the rows of lenses. “But what is it for? Can it be put to any military use?”

Sigvald was so engrossed in the movement of the lights that for a moment he could not bring himself to answer.

“Prince?” said Schüler, raising his voice.

Sigvald turned to the baron with a forced grin. “I imagine you’ve never seen anything so wonderful,” he said, pointing again at the lights. Before the baron could reply, Sigvald shook his head. “And yet you ask me such a boring question. Military use, you say.” He looked down at the ornate gold armour that covered his body and frowned. “How facile. I dearly hope you’re not going to disappoint me, baron. I must nurture your imagination. War is not the only pleasure in life.”

Schüler drew back his shoulders and clenched his jaw. “I did not abandon everything in search of mere entertainment, my lord. I need power. Military power. If you had seen the horrors that assail my lands and—”

“Very well,” interrupted Sigvald, shaking his head. “I’ll humour you. You asked me how I knew about your arrival in advance.” He looked over at the hunched mass of rags waiting by the door. “Oddrún,” he said. “The wall.”

The gangly giant pitched and weaved across the chamber to a tall rosewood cabinet. He unclasped one of the drawers and slid out a brass mechanism. Then he crushed something in his fist, sprinkled it over the device and leant his great bulk against the machine until a sharp *click* echoed around the room.

One by one the lenses were shuttered, until the whole chamber was plunged into darkness. Then there was another *click* and a rumbling of spinning gears.

Schüler flinched as one side of the chamber lurched into movement.

Sigvald patted the baron on the back and led him towards the wall as it broke into a series of shutters and began rolling up towards the ceiling. As the shutters moved higher they revealed a large curved window, looking out onto the snowy wastes.

After a couple of minutes, the entire chamber was transformed into a glass bowl, filled with glittering moonlight. Schüler once more found himself surrounded by thick, spinning banks of snow and the jagged, towering peaks of the Chaos Wastes. He shook his head in wonder. “How strange to see it but not feel it.” He looked down at his body, noticing for the first time that he was only dressed in thin purple robes. “To witness the ferocity of the weather and yet feel so warm.”

Sigvald’s face was flushed with pride as they approached the glass wall. “Quite,” he said, peering out into the storm. “But surely you’re not impressed by mere entertainment.” He smirked as he gestured to a row of brass rings at the base of the window. “Try one.”

Schüler stooped down and freed one of the rings with a *clink*. It was a few inches in diameter and fixed to the glass wall by a network of lead tracks and runners.

Sigvald gestured for the baron to lift the ring up before his face.

Schüler did as he was instructed, sliding the circle of metal up the glass dome until it was level with his eyes. Then he gasped. The ring housed a thick lens and as he looked through it, the distant mountains flew towards him, filling his vision and allowing him to see them in incredible detail. “Is it magic?” he asked.

Sigvald laughed at the baron’s shocked expression. “Of course! A very particular kind of sorcery called optiks. I believe the grinding techniques were perfected in your own Empire, but never have they been utilised so charmingly—or usefully. We tracked your progress for days before you reached the palace. No one can approach without my knowledge. Not everyone is admitted, of course, but I had a feeling you were someone worth knowing.”

Schüler could not take his eyes away from the lens as he slid it across the

curved glass. As he moved it back and forth, it revealed the forbidding landscape in amazing clarity, allowing him to see for miles in every direction. “What’s that?” he exclaimed, pointing the lens to the north of the palace.

Sigvald laughed. “What can you see?”

“I see beautiful lights, hanging down from the heavens. Like a curtain, shimmering and drifting.” Schüler shook his head in amazement. “It’s clear and solid at the same time. Is it a reflection on the dome?”

Sigvald’s smile faded and he placed a hand on the baron’s shoulder. “I should look elsewhere baron. That’s not a reflection—at least not the kind you mean. You’re looking at the source of everything.” He gently turned the baron’s face away from the lights. “Your eyes aren’t strong enough for such things yet. That way lies the realm of the gods, the Realm of Chaos itself. Beyond those lights, this world ends and another begins.” He leant closer and whispered in the baron’s ear. “If you could draw back that veil, you would behold the well-spring of every power that drives us: fear, lust, avarice, love, envy, hate, even magic; all of them stem from the other side of those lights.”

“You mean the afterlife?”

“Possibly. Or perhaps something much stranger.”

“But it looks so close. As though it were just a few days’ march from here.”

Sigvald nodded. “It is. Be under no illusions, baron. You’ve travelled further than you think.” He squeezed the baron’s shoulder. “You’ve reached the edge of everything.”

Schüler’s face blanched and he ran a trembling hand over his beard. Then he turned away from Sigvald and looked through the lens again. Despite his curiosity he obeyed Sigvald and slid the ring in a different direction. After a few moments he gasped. “There they are,” he cried, grimacing with disgust and flinching back from the lens. “The brutes that killed my men.”

Sigvald frowned. There was a second *clink* as he raised another lens from the casement and peered through it. He saw a group of soldiers riding through the snowy foothills. They were dressed in thick, crimson armour, edged with brass spikes, and their helmets resembled snarling dogs. Through the lens they looked almost close enough to touch, but he knew they must be many miles away. “Ah,” he said. The smile dropped from his face and he lowered the glass, turning Schüler away from the window. “Let’s move on,” he said, sounding uncharacteristically subdued. “There’s a lot to see before the banquet.”

“Banquet?”

“Yes, I have something very special to reveal this evening.” He led the baron towards a door on the far side of the chamber. “You, of course, will be my

guest of honour.”

As Oddrún began to lower the shutters, the baron and the prince made their way down a winding staircase. Sigvald threw some furs over the baron’s shoulders and led him out onto a slender bridge between two of the buildings. As they hurried through the snow, Schüler glimpsed down and saw the rocky foundations of the palace, hanging towards the ground like an inverted mountain. His head span at the sight of it. “How can such a thing be possible?” he asked, pausing to look down over the side of the bridge. As he squinted down through the dazzling snow, a movement caught his eye.

Sigvald followed his gaze and saw the dark, crumpled shape of a man, spread-eagled across the frozen rocks, with another figure hunched over it. They were too far away to be seen clearly, but there was no disguising the fact that the kneeling figure was cutting into the other one’s neck with some kind of saw. As they watched the gruesome scene, the snow around the two men began to turn red.

Oddrún appeared and as he saw the figures below he turned his shrouded head towards the prince. Even though his face was hidden in shadow, his agitation was clear.

Sigvald shrugged and hurried to the baron’s side. He laughed at the confused expression on Schüler’s face and turned him back towards the palace. “We should get you inside. I imagine you’ve seen enough snow to last you a lifetime.”



CHAPTER FIVE

Sväla's dreams were leaking from her head. The figures huddled around her litter were clearly real—the acrid tang of their sweat convinced her of that—but beyond them she saw others that simply could not be there: faces dragged from her past and huge crowds of strangers who called out to her by name. The real and the unreal merged into a bewildering whirl of people and places. Sväla looked up at the rune-carved beams of the mead hall and saw daemons, writhing and screaming as they lunged across her vision. “Am I mad?” she asked, her voice little more than a husky croak.

Some of the faces loomed closer. “She spoke,” said one of them, placing a hand on her arm.

Sväla felt a rush of hope. If they had heard her, she must still be alive. She tried to lift her head, but as she did so the smoke-filled hall began to spin wildly around her and she slumped back again with a groan. Someone pressed a cup to her lips and as she swallowed the water, her thoughts cleared a little. “The fire,” she gasped, remembering her vigil. Her heart raced as she remembered how crucial it was that she guard the flames. Then she recalled the smirking face of Æstrid as she revealed Hauk's wedding ring. Was that a dream too? She became aware of a dull ache in her left hand and looked down at it, unclenching her fist. The ring was embedded in her bloody palm. “Hauk,” she croaked, her voice filled with despair and anger. “I was true to you.”

She closed her eyes against the collage of faces and allowed the fever to drag her back down into a welcoming oblivion. As the real world slipped away, the other one grew clearer. A confusing array of images filled her head. She saw

herself leading a vast army against towering, inhuman foes. She saw a golden palace, hanging in the sky above a frozen landscape. She saw Norscan chieftains, their eyes filled with hate as they charged towards her. She saw a charred human head on a gilt-edged plate. She saw an impossibly beautiful young woman, begging her for aid. These and countless other, smaller scenes played out through her head, but one image kept returning. An awful reminder of failure that drove Sväla deeper into unconsciousness: the brazier, abandoned and smoking as dawn broke over the steppe.

“Wake up,” called a voice.

Sväla tried to ignore it. She had no desire to return to the real world. Nothing but death could ease the pain of her failure, she saw that quite clearly. Something needled at her though. As the voice repeated its summons, the spinning torrent of visions in her head began to merge into a single image: an ancient, shrew-like face, with skin like crumbling parchment and dazzling green eyes. As the face expanded to fill her vision, something about the crone’s stern features refused to let her slip any deeper into unconsciousness. “Wake up,” demanded the old woman, glaring down at her. Finally, with a groan of annoyance, Sväla opened her eyes.

She looked up into a furious mask of pierced flesh.

“Svärd,” she said, recognising her son.

The boy sneered with disgust. “How could you fail your husband like that?” His face was only inches from hers. “He needed you and now he’s dead.”

“He betrayed me,” she gasped. Then a surge of anger pulsed through her as she looked up into Svärd’s face. “You were with him. *You* could have kept him alive.”

Svärd’s eyes widened with shock, but before he could reply, hands dropped on his shoulders and pulled him away. Then another face filled Sväla’s vision. This was a much older man, with weather-beaten skin and silver-streaked hair. There was a kindness in his eyes that she found even more of a torment than her son’s rage. Guilt knifed into her as she recognised Valdür the Old—Hauk’s closest friend. She turned her face away in shame, but he placed one of his calloused hands on her face and turned it back towards him.

“I have something for you,” he said, holding an object up between his thumb and forefinger. “Hauk made me swear to bring this back to you if he couldn’t.”

Sväla managed to raise her head for a better look and saw that it was Hauk’s wedding ring. “It can’t be,” she croaked, looking down at her bloody hand. “I already have it.”

Valdür followed her gaze and shook his head in confusion. He plucked the other ring from her hand and examined it in the torchlight. "This isn't Hauk's," he said, tossing it to the ground. "I took the real one from his dead hand."

Anger flooded Sväla's trembling limbs and she pulled herself into a sitting position. She snatched the real wedding ring from Valdür's hand and clutched it to her breast. "It was a trick," she gasped, amazed at how easily she had been fooled. She looked around the mead hall through tearful eyes. The men crowded round her litter were covered in fresh scars and odd, serpentine blisters. Sväla recognised all of them. They were her husband's most trusted warriors. The last time she saw them they had been stiff-necked and proud, but now their shoulders were hunched by defeat and their eyes were blank with grief.

Beyond them, she saw some of the tribesmen who had ridiculed her vigil. A group of them were huddled around the huge open fire on one side of the hall, locked in a fierce debate. Several of them were brandishing their axes and hurling insults at each other, and every now and then, one of them would wave in her direction. It was hard to see them clearly through the smoke, but she saw that the figure at the heart of the scrum wore a wolf skin over his head. "Ungaur," she said, guessing immediately who had told the girl to lie. Her anger grew. "He tricked me," she said, glaring at the shaman's burly silhouette.

Valdür raised a finger to his mouth. "It's not wise to accuse Ungaur the Blessed," he whispered, "unless you wish to find yourself strapped to an altar."

"He wouldn't dare," gasped Sväla, but as she looked again she noticed a glint of metal in the shaman's hands. As he whispered urgently to the men nearest to him, he waved it in her direction. It was a curved sacrificial knife, scored with runes. She had seen him use it many times before, to brutal effect.

Valdür leant closer and gripped her shoulders. "Hauk's dead," he hissed. "You're no longer the chieftain's wife." He leant even closer and whispered in her ear. "Ungaur's trying to convince the elders that *he* should become the next chieftain and I'm not sure they'll argue the point for long. Then his only obstacle is you."

"How can a shaman become a chieftain?" cried Sväla.

Valdür grimaced and looked back over his shoulder. "He's using the curse as an excuse. He says that the Wolf has spoken to him and that we will only be forgiven if we allow him to lead the tribe."

At the sound of Sväla's question, the shaman had begun striding across the hall towards them, baring his mouthful of black spines. When he saw that Sväla was awake, and clutching the real wedding ring, he paused and began speaking urgently to the other tribesmen. The argument erupted once more.

“We’ve little time,” Valdür said, with a note of urgency in his voice. “Ungaur had convinced the elders that you wouldn’t recover. He told them that the best way you could serve the tribe was by offering your body in penance for your husband’s failure.” He kept his voice to a whisper. “You must try and rise from your bed. Prove him wrong. There’s still a little love left for you in this tribe and not everyone is convinced by Ungaur’s blood lust.” He waved to the small, despondent group of warriors huddled around them. “Hauk’s men would follow you to the ends of the earth if you asked them to.”

Sväla dropped back onto her litter. “What can I do? I can’t deny that we’re cursed. Without Hauk, what option is there, other than Ungaur’s useless sacrifices?”

Valdür frowned. “I’m not sure,” he muttered. “But your husband believed there must be some other answer. If only we knew *why* we are cursed, maybe we could find another way to appease Völtar. I think you could lead us to the truth, Sväla.” He peered intently at her. “Hauk said that Ungaur knows more than he chooses to reveal. He died believing that the Fallen could shake off this curse and rise again. Would you abandon everything he fought for?”

Sväla felt the truth of Valdür’s words, as clearly as the cool metal of the ring she was holding against her chest. “You’re right. I can’t fail him.” She gripped Valdür’s arm. “Not again.”

She looked past him into the gloomy shadows and saw that her dreams were still painted over the top of the real world. Many of the scenes were playing themselves out over and over again, as though urging her to realise their significance. Above it all, a pair of small, green eyes stared down at her from a nest of lined skin. “Ürsüla,” she gasped, remembering the old woman’s name. She dragged herself to her feet and stood swaying before the tribesmen. “Take me to the witch.”



CHAPTER SIX

As the baron trailed after Sigvald, his eyes rolled in their darkened sockets, unable to fathom the stream of surreal images that assailed them. After leaving the Empyrean Dome they entered a huge arched glasshouse. It ran along one whole wing of the palace—undulating like a snake and crowded with unnatural life.

They stepped inside and the baron immediately stumbled back against the steamy glass. “So hot,” he gasped, looking up at a thick canopy of leaves. The creaking plants that towered above him were all bright white. There was not a trace of greenery anywhere in the whole garden. The anaemic plants seemed like an extension of the endless moonlight. “How can they live, without sunlight?” he asked.

Sigvald looked up at the crush of white leaves. “You must stop thinking like a man,” he said. “You’re more than that now.” He waved at the pale trunks. “We call this the Ice Garden.” He pulled aside a leaf as big as a horse and nodded at the shadows behind. “The plants here thrive on a different kind of food than those you’re used to.”

Schüler peered into the undergrowth and saw a flash of colour in the shadows. “Is that a flower?” he asked, stepping closer. As he neared the colour, the baron saw that there was a pile of bodies beneath the leaves—a mound of men and women, dressed in gaudy, flamboyant robes. He edged closer, horrified. “Are they dead? Do the plants eat them?”

“Nothing so vulgar as that,” replied the prince with a disapproving smile.

“The plants are simply the fruit of their dreams.”

The baron crouched next to the bodies and saw that the prince was telling the truth: the colourful figures weren't dead, they were simply fast asleep. He could see their chests rising and falling slowly as they sprawled over the pale, sweaty leaves. They were completely penned in by a mass of roots and leaves, but the beatific smiles on their faces made it clear they were in no discomfort. As he edged closer, however, the baron groaned in dismay. The bodies had obviously lain undisturbed for months, if not years. Their faces were as gaunt as his and their limbs had grown as pale and thin as the tendrils that entwined them. As he got closer, the baron realised that the bodies were sighing and moaning with ecstasy—utterly oblivious to the fact that some of the tendrils had slid beneath their skin and were snaking slowly up towards their brains. The baron recoiled—rushing back out from beneath the huge leaves and onto the path.

“Who are they?” he cried, backing away with a look of disgust.

“Dreamers,” replied the prince, looking at the pile of bodies with obvious pride. “Artists, poets, architects. People who have spent their whole lives trying to pursue their dreams but found their ambition blocked at every turn by petty concerns. Here they are free to follow their thoughts.” He waved up at the towering white plants. “And while they slumber, their ideas blossom and grow into this wonderful creation, this dazzling fecundity.”

The baron looked again at the plants and saw that they were formed into the most bizarre shapes: castles and fantastic beasts teetered over him, all sculpted from the ivory leaves. Then he grimaced again. “But their bodies are wasting away.”

“What of it?” snapped Sigvald. He waved up at the towering plants. “Look what they have created! How wonderful to think that such beauty could stem from such insignificance.” He stepped closer to the baron and gripped his arm. “Think beyond the confines of your flesh, Schüler. Think beyond your meagre lifespan. Think of the endless pleasures your mind could devise, if it were set free.”

The baron looked up from the wasted poets to the incredible structures their dreams had painted. He gave a grudging nod of respect.

Sigvald grinned and dragged him along the winding path that led through the middle of the glasshouse. “This is nothing though. Nothing! Just wait. There's so much more to see.”

They re-entered the palace and went into a long, high-ceilinged gallery that was clearly no longer in use. Hundreds of weapons lined the walls and suits of armour stood beneath them in silent readiness. Every single blade was rusted and

sheathed in dust but Sigvald strode onwards, blind to the decay that was slowly destroying his home.

As soon as Oddrún closed the door on the glasshouse, the baron paused and scowled. “What’s that?” he cried, reaching for his absent sword.

Dozens of voices were calling out in pain and begging for mercy. The noise was coming from behind a door at the far end of the gallery.

Sigvald strode towards the door, seemingly oblivious to the awful screams.

“My lord,” slurred Oddrún, nodding towards the white-faced baron. “Perhaps the surgeries could wait for now?”

Sigvald looked back with a confused expression on his face. “What do you mean? I’m sure—”

Before the prince could finish, the door flew open and a pair of men burst into the armoury.

The baron immediately recognised the sneering brute who had introduced him to Sigvald. “Víga-Barói,” he whispered, looking suddenly ashamed. The knight had replaced his plum-coloured armour with a leather apron, but no one could forget a face filled with such malice. His apron was covered in stains and hung with a gruesome selection of tools: pliers, needles and sickle-shaped knives, all of them dark with dried blood. The man trailing behind him also wore a filthy apron and carried his own collection of cruel-looking implements.

Something about Víga-Barói’s follower made the baron peer at him in confusion. “A monk?” he whispered in disbelief. The man’s head was tonsured and he was covered in religious icons: hammers and flaming comets adorned the hooded robe beneath his apron. There was no sign of religious conviction in his eyes though. He looked like a sleepwalker. As he shuffled after the knight, his face was slack and expressionless. When he came to a halt a few feet away, Baron Schüler noticed that the blood-splattered man had a single thin scar up one side of his throat.

“Prince Sigvald,” said the knight, dropping to one knee. “How delightful. You visit us so rarely these days.” He rose to his feet and waved through the doorway. “Have you come to join in? We’re making great progress with the new subjects. Hazül has recently developed some techniques that I think you’ll find quite diverting.”

Sigvald’s reply was drowned out by a chorus of desperate screams.

“Excuse me, your majesty,” said the knight, closing the door to muffle the sounds.

“It will have to wait, I’m afraid,” said the prince, with obvious disappointment. He gestured to Baron Schüler. “I’m showing our guest around

the palace.”

“Ah, of course.” Víga-Barói looked over at the baron with undisguised scorn, but when he spoke, his voice was silky and low. “We’re so glad to have you amongst us, baron.” He ran a finger over one of his bloodstained tools. “I’m looking forward to making your acquaintance more fully.” He let the words hang in the air for a few seconds, then turned back to Sigvald and gestured to the door. “Are you *sure* you wouldn’t like me to show the baron around our operating theatres?”

Sigvald shook his head. “Not today, Víga-Barói. Perhaps another time.” He smiled. “Did you receive my message?”

The knight bowed again. “Indeed. The banquet. We’re all thrilled to learn what your surprise will be.”

Sigvald flushed with pride as he returned the bow. “I think you’ll be impressed.”

Víga-Barói tried to turn his frozen sneer into a smile. “And is it true that the princess will also be attending?”

“Of course,” replied Sigvald, sounding a little irritated. “Why not? I want everyone to see my new creation. My wife included.”

The knight looked over at Baron Schüler with an indecipherable expression on his scarred face. “Very good, prince.”

They moved on, but after speaking to Víga-Barói, Sigvald seemed to lose interest in the tour. They hurried through a series of other, equally wonderful chambers: vast, gloomy amphitheatres, dusty art galleries and raucous, neglected menageries, but it was clear that the prince’s mind was elsewhere. The mention of the banquet had filled him with excitement and, as the baron trailed after him, he counted off guests on his fingertips and muttered under his breath. Finally, with a hurried bow, he returned Schüler to his chambers. “Oddrún will supply you with anything you need,” he said, ushering the baron back into the bedchamber. “It’s probably best if you remain here though, until you’re called for.” He laughed. “The palace can be a little mischievous.” He clutched the baron’s hand and kissed it, his handsome face glowing with excitement. “Tonight’s feast will be like nothing you have ever dreamt of, Schüler.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

The going was slow. The survivors of Hauk's raiding party were exhausted and filled with despair. Only Valdür's barked commands kept them on their feet as they trudged wearily through the dewy grass. Up ahead of them, Sväla clung to Valdür's arm. Her head was still full of bewildering images and her limbs were weak with fever. As they marched though, her certainty was growing. Hauk had always insisted that there must be a reason for the tribe's curse and she knew now that it was up to her to find it. Her gaunt face was set in a determined frown as she eyed the horizon. "I think Völtar answered me," she said, turning to the old warrior at her side.

Valdür paused and allowed her to catch her breath. They had almost reached the barren foothills the witch called home. "What do you mean?"

She grimaced as she looked back at a single, morose straggler, trailing behind the other men. It was Svärd, her son. They had not spoken since their harsh words when Sväla first awoke. "When I saw that the sacred fire was out, I called on Völtar for aid." She looked up at the vast Norscan sky. "And now my mind is full of these awful visions. I think he's trying to guide me." She turned to Valdür. Her voice was calm, but her eyes were raw from crying. "Or do you think I've lost my reason?"

Valdür frowned and leant towards her. "Grief can do strange things to a person." He nodded at the approaching tribesmen. "Perhaps you should keep this to yourself for the time being."

She nodded back and looked down at her left hand. She now wore two

wedding rings. Hauk's was too large for her finger, so she had knotted a piece of black cloth around the two of them, binding them together. "Hauk never believed in Ungaur. Sacrifice is one thing, but to give away our strongest and youngest is suicide." She took a deep breath and began walking again. "There has to be another way to lift this curse. We must have become the Fallen for a reason. It was not always this way."

Valdür nodded. "I agree, but what help do you expect from Ürsüla? Völtar has reserved a special curse for her. Her reason is *definitely* lost. From what I've heard, she spends most of her time talking to the dirt."

Sväla shook her head. "But it's her face I see most of all. She hangs over everything. I know the stories, but who could lead such an existence without becoming a little mad? According to Ungaur, she has one foot in the mortal realm and another in the afterlife. Surely she must know something about our past and our curse?" She shrugged and looked at Valdür. "Anyway, if she can't help, then I suppose I'll have my answer. I'm just as deluded as she is. Maybe I can talk to the dirt too."

The sun was reaching its zenith as they approached the witch's hut. The harsh sunlight made the hovel look all the more pathetic. It was a festering heap, constructed of mud, animal hides, dung and flies. As the tribesmen approached they raised their hands to their noses and groaned at the stink.

"The witch is obviously dead," called Svärd as he climbed up towards them and saw the state of the hovel. He glared at his mother. "Who would live in that? We may as well leave. You're wasting our time."

Sväla flinched from her son's glare but felt all the more determined to prove him wrong. She realised that she had already watched this scene. One of the visions swirling round her head showed her entering the hut and finding the old witch alive, surrounded by grotesque, misshapen figures. "She lives," she called back, loud enough for all the tribesmen to hear. They looked from her to her son and then to the ruined hut, and were clearly unconvinced. As she studied their faces, Sväla realised that they were all afraid.

"Take a look," said Valdür, indicating that Sväla should enter the hut.

Sväla saw that even he was afraid and realised that she would have to go alone. She hesitated on the threshold for a moment, remembering all the strange stories she had heard about the woman, then she pulled aside some of the animal skins and stepped into the gloomy hut. No sunlight followed her in and for a few seconds she was utterly blind. "Ürsüla?" she whispered, peering into the thick, smoky darkness. "Are you there?" There was no reply, but Sväla thought she heard a noise from somewhere further inside; it sounded like a knife chopping

into something soft. As she edged slowly forward, her eyes began to grow accustomed to the gloom and Sväla realised that she was not alone. She let out a small gasp as she saw dozens of figures standing silently in the dark, watching her. She remembered the hideous shapes she had seen in her premonition. “Hello?” she called out, suppressing the urge to flee.

The chopping sound stopped.

“Ürsüla?” she repeated.

A few feet away, one of the shadows began shuffling towards her. There was a red, flickering light wavering in front of it that revealed the heavily lined face of an old woman.

Sväla grabbed her knife, preparing to defend herself.

“I have nothing for you,” cried the woman in a hoarse, barking voice. “There’s nothing here worth taking.”

Sväla lowered the knife as the old woman approached. “I’m no thief. I just want your help.”

There was a pause as the old woman considered this. Then she laughed. It was a raw, croaking sound that quickly turned into a hacking cough. Once she had calmed herself, she took a long drag on a pipe. Its bowl flared with light that glittered in her mischievous eyes. Then she tugged aside some animal skins and allowed a little more daylight into the hut.

As the darkness receded, Sväla recognised Ürsüla from her dreams. She was frail, incredibly ancient and covered in filth—mud, feathers, sticks and blood were all plastered over her scrawny frame—but she was also oddly beautiful. Her short-cropped hair was pure silver and her eyes were a striking, vivid green.

“Let me look at you,” said the old woman, stepping closer and peering at her guest. “Yes,” she said, nodding slowly, “I see. You might be the one to do it.”

“Do what?”

“Lead us to victory, child.”

Sväla felt oddly naked under the old woman’s gaze and could not think how to reply. To hide her confusion she looked around at the other figures. To her surprise, she realised that they were not real people at all. They were crudely built life-size dolls, constructed mostly from mud, but with the addition of bones, animal furs and human hair. She grimaced as she saw that some of them even had teeth and pieces of skin pressed into their eyeless faces. “What are they?” she gasped, backing away from the crooked figures.

The old woman laughed again. “Don’t you recognise any of them?” she asked. “What about that one?” She waved at one still mostly hidden in the

darkness.

“What do you mean?” asked Sväla.

The old woman simply smiled and waved again at the strange sculpture.

Sväla crossed the room, being careful not to get too close to the old crone. As she neared the statue she frowned. The anatomy was as crude and misshapen as the others, but it did seem vaguely familiar. It was slender and the clumsy indication of breasts and hips was obviously meant to imply it was a woman. The mud had dried to a pale grey and was covered with blue runes. Sväla felt a chill of fear. “Is this meant to be me?”

“It is you,” replied the old woman, stepping to her side and slapping her hand on the doll’s arm.

Sväla looked closer and saw that several blonde hairs had been pressed into the thing’s scalp. She reached out and placed her hand on the cool mud. “Is this my hair?”

Ürsüla smiled and lifted her voice into a wavering song: “Hair, teeth and blood, pressed deep in the mud; followed with flesh, the memories will flood.”

She stroked Sväla’s hair and laughed at her look of revulsion. “It’s not important, child. They simply need such things before they can speak to me. It’s what gives them life.”

Sväla withdrew her hand from the mud and backed away. “They live?” she said, with a growing sense of unease. She had heard of the old woman’s madness, but in the oily darkness of her hut, Ürsüla’s words seemed horribly believable.

“Of course they live.” The old woman leant close to Sväla, narrowing her eyes. “Why else would I spend so long talking to them?”

Sväla’s heart sank. Valdür was right. The woman was clearly too insane to be of any use. “Yes, of course,” she muttered, turning to leave. “I should go.”

Ürsüla grabbed her arm. Her grip was surprisingly strong as she pulled Sväla closer. “The shaman plans to kill you,” she said calmly.

Sväla grimaced at the heady mixture of herbs and alcohol on the woman’s breath. “Yes,” she said, straining to free herself from Ürsüla’s grip. Then she froze. “How did you know that?”

The old woman let out another rattling burst of laughter and waved to one of the dolls. “He told me.”

Sväla saw that the doll was larger than the others and it had a small piece of grey wolf skin draped over its head. She stopped trying to free herself from Ürsüla’s grip and looked around at the ranks of mute figures. “What else has he told you?”

Ürsüla let go of Sväla's arm and walked over to the likeness of Ungaur. "They tell me many things. Anything I ask them." She slapped the hulking statue. "Ungaur was taught by his father, who in turn was taught by his father before him. His memories go back through centuries of ancestors. Back even to the years before the curse. He has a lot to talk about."

"Then he must know the reason for the curse," said Sväla with a sinking feeling. "And his sacrifices must be the only hope." Her shoulders dropped and she shook her head. "I thought there might be a more certain way to lift the curse: a way that we could atone for whatever crime we've committed against Völtar. But if the shaman knows so much, he must be right. We're doomed to be the Fallen forever."

Ürsüla shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not." She took a motherly thoughtful drag on her pipe and gave Sväla a strange smile. "He may have reasons of his own for not discussing the true nature of the curse." The old woman grabbed Sväla's arm again and led her over to the doll. Then she opened Sväla's left hand and peered at the fresh scars that networked her palm. "They need a little blood to loosen their tongues," she said, nodding at Sväla's knife.

Sväla hesitated for a few seconds, unsure whether to humour the old woman any further. Then she remembered the image of Ürsüla hanging over her as she lay dying. She held the knife over her hand and pressed the point gently into one of the scars, producing a small droplet of blood.

The old woman slammed her hand down so that the blade sliced deep into her flesh.

Sväla hissed in pain and snatched her hand away from the witch. As she did so, a fan of her blood splashed over the hulking statue of Ungaur.

"They need quite a lot of blood," said the old woman with an apologetic shrug.

Sväla glared at her and clutched her hand. "You're as mad as everyone said," she snapped, turning back towards the door. She gently drew the blade from her hand, wincing as yet more of her blood splashed onto the ground. As she reached the skins that covered the entrance, she paused. There was a low, liquid gurgling sound coming from behind her.

"You may as well get what you came for, child," said the old woman, shuffling after Sväla and turning her back towards the statue.

Sväla felt a sickening rush of fear as she looked at the statue. Its whole frame was trembling slightly and the strange moaning sound was coming from somewhere in its throat. "What's happening?" she said, pointing her knife at the figure in the shadows. As she watched in horror, the crudely drawn lips on the

statue's face drew back to reveal a row of black spines and the gurgling sound turned into a torrent of droning words.

"Kurgan," slurred the mud. "Small enough to kill. My axe in his fist. Knife. Throat. Axe. Hand. Cut. Cut. Cut. I have him by the throat. Blood. Völtar is here. In my veins. The Kurgan's dying. I'm squeezing the life from him: squeezing, squeezing, squeezing. Bones cracking. Rain on my face. It's colder. The bones are sharp. I can feel the bones breaking beneath my fingers. Dead. Mud. Pain. Others are coming. I must be quick. Father has the chieftain's heart. He's lifting it up. The others can see it. Blood, blood and rain."

"What's it talking about?" gasped Sväla, turning to the old woman.

Ürsüla grinned back at her. "I'm mad, remember. There's no use asking me."

"I'm sorry," said Sväla, grabbing the old woman's hands in hers and stooping until their faces were level. "I didn't understand."

As Sväla pleaded with the witch, the malformed shape continued talking to itself in the shadows, describing a battle with horrible, mounting urgency. "He's dead. There's blood in my belly. The other one has cut me. I'm pulling my axe from the corpse. Swinging it. Hot blood. Hot pain. My belly is split. I can't stop the blood."

Ürsüla shrugged and led Sväla back towards the mumbling statue. "This is one of Ungaur's memories," she explained. "Or maybe even one of his ancestors' memories." She pointed to the thing's hands. There were several human fingernails embedded in the mud. "He lost those during one of his sacrifices. It was easy enough for me to retrieve them. Now his thoughts are mine to share. These words are flowing directly from his mind."

Sväla looked in horror at the trembling pile of mud. As its monologue increased in urgency, the drawings of its eyelids were starting to open slightly, revealing a pair of glistening red orbs.

"But why?" asked Sväla, shaking her head in disgust. "What use is this monstrosity?" Her eyes widened as a thought occurred to her. She lifted her knife. "What would happen to the real Ungaur if I cut this one?"

Ürsüla laughed. "Not your closest friend, eh?" She lowered Sväla's knife and shook her head. "You can't use the statue to harm him, but his mind is yours to explore. Surely that is of interest to you?" She leant closer to Sväla. "Why did you come here, child?"

Sväla clutched her head. The temperature in the hovel and the droning gibberish spilling from the statue combined to leave her head spinning. She looked around at the other statues, half expecting to see them all springing to

life. The one next to Ungaur was particularly disturbing. It was more slender than the others, bleached white and was smiling oddly at her from beneath two small black horns. She took a deep breath and looked back at the witch. "I need to know why we're cursed." She turned back to the statue of Ungaur, feeling her rage returning. "The shaman has done nothing to save us from the other tribes, but my husband believed there must be some simple reason for the curse, and Ungaur was hiding it from us. Just so he could maintain his place in the tribe. Hauk thought there must be something we could do other than letting Ungaur sacrifice us one by one. He said the shaman must know some secret. Something that would explain why we could no longer catch our prey or defeat our enemies."

Ürsüla exhaled a plume of smoke into Sväla's face. "Then ask him," she said.

Sväla waved the smoke away and turned to the gurgling lump of mud. "You mean...?"

The witch nodded and indicated that Sväla should step closer to the statue.

Sväla approached the thing and forced herself to look at its grotesque face. Its eyeballs were now fully revealed. They had no pupils. They were nothing more than sacks of blood, rolling wildly in their muddy sockets as the statue continued its garbled monologue. "Running. Rain. Bodies. Gods. The spirits are in my eyes. Everything is the Wolf. I am the Wolf."

"Why are we cursed?" asked Sväla. The idea of communicating with the hideous doll terrified her and her voice was little more than a whisper.

"Louder!" snapped the old woman.

Sväla looked back at her and noticed that there was a gleam of excitement in her bright, green eyes.

"Why are we cursed?" Sväla asked again, lifting her voice into a trembling yell.

The statue's monologue stopped dead. Its blank eyes rolled in their sockets and fixed on Sväla. To her horror, it seemed to be looking directly at her.

"Cursed," groaned the statue, gargling the word around the back of its throat, as though savouring an unfamiliar flavour.

Sväla held her breath and it seemed as though the statue was doing the same. Its trembling stopped and for a few moments it made no sound. The only noise came from the witch, crouched by Sväla's side and breathing heavily with excitement.

Then the statue began to mumble again. The monologue had been replaced with a single word, repeated over and over again. The statue began to shake

violently as its voice grew louder. Finally it screamed the word so loud that mud sprayed from its crooked mouth and its chin began to crumble. “Sigvald!” it screamed, shaking its head as though it were in pain. “Sigvald!”



CHAPTER EIGHT

Baron Schüler studied the fork in his hand. His haggard face stared back at him from the polished silver with a look of fierce hatred. “I must die,” he muttered under his breath, wondering if the metal would be sharp enough to pierce his throat. He was clad from head to toe in a beautifully filigreed suit of purple armour, courtesy of his benevolent host. The prince’s servants had bathed him, doused him in scented oil, trimmed his beard and combed his hair; they had even rouged his cheeks and painted a bit of colour onto his cracked lips, but all their efforts had somehow conspired to leave him looking even more corpse-like.

“I’m sorry,” said the guest sat next to him. “Did you say something?”

Schüler shook his head and looked down the length of the dining table. His fury had driven him north without any clear plan, but he had never imagined his journey would end like this. He whispered a prayer for his men, hoping desperately that they were not enduring such awful sights. The light of a dozen candelabras had finally revealed to the baron the full horror of the Geld-Prince’s court. A host of vile, diabolical souls were sat around him, chatting quietly and waiting for their prince to arrive.

The figure sitting opposite Schüler was vaguely man-shaped, but its naked flesh was a bright, virulent pink and its whole body glistened like raw meat. A pair of spindly, paper-thin wings was folded behind its back and its face was a pouting mess of gristle and canines. It was whispering to the guests on its right: a pair of life-size, porcelain figurines, with limbs the colour of old, yellowed ivory. As the dolls leant closer to the winged creature, cracks opened up in their polished torsos, revealing a dark layer of exposed muscle and ligaments beneath.

The sight of the bizarre creatures repulsed the baron more than anything he had seen so far. The dolls' smooth, ceramic heads were decorated with painted locks and angelic, girlish features, but their glass eyes were full of animal hunger. As they listened to the winged creature, they giggled and rattled around on their seats. One of them caught the baron's eye and lowered a porcelain eyelid in a slow, suggestive wink.

Schüler turned away in disgust but struggled to know where to look. All around the table were figures so grotesque that it pained him to look at them. It seemed as though a butcher's block of animal parts had been combined with the contents of a mortuary, and then painted in the gaudy colours of a lunatic's nightmare. A wonderful banquet had been laid out for them: plates of meat and quivering, fruit-filled jellies that looked almost as fantastic as the guests and, in a distant corner, a group of bizarre, misshapen musicians were playing a gentle waltz. A beautiful portrait of the prince looked down over the peculiar scene and Schüler decided to rest his eyes on the prince's noble face for a while.

The guest to Schüler's right had been too intent on eating to join in with the general conversation. The belching, snorting sounds coming from its mouth were so loud and bestial that for a long time the baron could not bring himself to look at it. He imagined from the slurping, tearing sounds that he must be seated next to some kind of enormous ruminant. Eventually, Schüler's curiosity overcame him and he stole a quick look. He was next to a huge, bulbous, disembodied head, with scraps of half-eaten food hanging from its mouth. The thing's pale, jowly face was as big as the baron's whole body and it was sat in a nest of white serpents that trailed down from its flabby neck. The overall effect was that of a giant, fleshy squid. The baron opened his mouth to reply, but as he looked into the thing's huge, watery eyes, his words froze in his mouth. He felt his sanity teetering on the brink of collapse.

The head gave him an encouraging smile. "I thought you said something," it said in a rumbling baritone. As it spoke, it looked hungrily at the baron's emaciated body and leant a little closer to him.

To the baron's horror he noticed that some of the thing's serpentine limbs had surrounded his chair and were trailing down over his shoulders.

"No," he said, leaning away from the creature's scaly limbs. "Nothing."

The head continued to watch him, panting slightly as it leant even closer. It seemed to be sniffing him.

"I just thought—well, I wondered," stammered the baron, searching desperately for something to say. "I wondered which of the guests is the prince's wife."

The head flopped back and laughed, opening its mouth so wide that Schüler could see the remnants of the first course sliding around on the back of its grotesque tongue. "So you've heard about Freydis?" As the thing laughed, its serpentine limbs patted the baron on the back. "You're a man after my own heart," it said. "On any normal occasion I would have been able to introduce you." The creature ran its tongue over its thick, sagging lips and gave the baron a lewd grin. "I'm Ansgallür the Famished, you see. I'm the girl's guardian."

It horrified Schüler to imagine such a grotesque monster being anyone's guardian. He felt a sudden urge to run screaming from the banquet hall, but he dreaded to think what might happen to him if he roamed around the palace without Sigvald to protect him. He decided to hide his fear until the prince arrived, then beg him for freedom. "I was led to understand that she would be here," he replied, attempting to sound calm.

"Oh, yes," said Ansgallür, letting his eyes roam around the table. "For once the Geld-Prince has requested her company. She should be at his side when he joins us." The head laughed again. "Sigvald rarely bothers with the poor child, but he's particularly excited about his latest toy." The head slumped into a frown and was about to say something more on the subject when the conversation around the table ceased. There was a scraping of chairs as the guests all climbed to whatever they used for feet.

Schüler stood up and looked down the table. At the far end of the hall he saw the cruel, scarred face of Víga-Barói, glaring at the guests as he entered the room. He had removed the bloody apron and was once more dressed in antiquated purple armour. He was still flanked by the blank-eyed Sigmarite who was now acting as a squire, carrying Sigvald's shield and a rapier. There was another figure at Víga-Barói's side: long-limbed and pale, but otherwise indiscernible, due to a mass of lilac hair that drifted around it like seaweed caught in the tide. As the guests turned towards Víga-Barói and his entourage, he bowed low and gestured at the doorway. "The Geld-Prince, Sigvald the Magnificent," he said, backing away into the shadows.

The guests remained silent as three figures stepped into the candlelight. Baron Schüler gasped as he saw Sigvald. His golden armour had been polished to a blinding sheen but his handsome face was even more dazzling. The young prince glowed with inner nobility. He did not seem to belong in the mortal realm at all and the baron suddenly wondered if the prince was actually some kind of god. Schüler's fear and doubt vanished as the prince approached the table. How could such a gallant figure allow any harm to come to him? How could such a man be anything other than divine? Then, as Sigvald stepped to one side and

gestured to a chair, the baron noticed his companions. Behind him was his constant shadow, the lurching chancellor Oddrún and then, taking the seat that was offered to her, was a young woman. For a second, Schüler forgot all about the prince and began staring at his wife. Her face was hidden behind a purple veil, but the rest of her body was almost entirely naked. Six slender strips of black leather were all that preserved her modesty and, as the candlelight traced over her soft curves and long, graceful limbs, the baron found himself leaning across the table to see her more clearly.

He flinched as he felt hot breath on his ear.

“Now you see why I have to keep her under lock and key,” whispered Ansgallür the Famished with a lewd chuckle. “Sigvald butchered an entire city just to place one kiss on her hand. Imagine what he would do to anyone who touched her.” The bulbous head shuffled closer to the baron. “It’s said that one glimpse of her face is enough to destroy a man.”

Schüler turned to his grotesque confidant with a question on his lips but at that moment Sigvald addressed his subjects.

“We are all princes here, my friends,” he cried, throwing his arms open to the motley assortment of creatures and lighting up the room with his dazzling smile. “The gates of the Gilded Palace do not admit anything less.” He turned his luminous gaze on Baron Schüler. “And now we have a new brother. A fellow traveller on this long journey of self discovery.”

The guests all turned towards the baron with forced, brittle grins, but he was blind to their jealousy as he bathed in Sigvald’s indulgent smile.

Sigvald signalled for everyone to be seated and then he began talking quietly to Oddrún who had crouched next to him, looking like a giant, robed insect.

Servants appeared, laden with trays of food, and the guests began to eat, but the baron could not take his eyes off Sigvald and his wife. As he watched them eating, he abandoned his thoughts of escape, realising that he could do nothing better than devote his life to these resplendent beings. He pushed his plate away and rose from his chair. The other guests paused to watch him as he walked to the head of the table. They lowered their forks and whispered to each other, clearly shocked by this break with protocol.

Sigvald did not notice the baron’s approach and continued whispering urgently to Oddrún as Schüler reached his side. The prince and the chancellor were both examining something on the chancellor’s lap: a gold casket, inscribed with runes and columns of impossibly tiny text.

The baron began to feel a little ridiculous. He realised that Víga-Barói and

all the other guests were glaring at him as he waited to be noticed. After a few moments, the princess looked up at him from behind her veil.

“I believe your latest ‘prince’ wishes to speak to you my darling,” she said. Her voice was as soft and beguiling as the rest of her, but there was an edge of sarcasm to it that made the baron feel even more absurd.

Sigvald looked up in surprise. “Baron,” he whispered, looking up and noticing that the exchange was being watched by all the other guests. “You should not rise from your seat before I do.” He stood up and addressed the whole room. “Our guest is exhausted from his long journey. I will forgive his poor manners on this occasion.” He waved the baron back to his chair. “Sit down quickly,” he hissed. “Or they will expect to see some sport.”

“I’m sorry, my lord,” said the baron, bowing low. “I only wanted to thank you for your hospitality and pay my respects to your wife.”

Sigvald gave him a strained grin. “Of course.” Then his grin became more genuine as an idea occurred to him. He gestured for the other guests to rise. “Actually, your timing is perfect, Baron Schüler.” He raised his voice to the rest of the room again. “Now we’ve eaten, I think it’s time I revealed my latest work.”

The guests all leapt to their feet, eager to see what Sigvald had to show them.

He took the gold casket from Oddrún’s bandaged hands and held it over his head. “Youth should be timeless,” he cried, moving away from his chair and pacing around the banquet hall. “It should not be weighed down by the miserable demands of age and infirmity.” He leapt up onto the table, scattering plates and candles as he landed on the polished marble. “Those who chose to join me on this wonderful journey will not be left to rot like their ancestors. We will not be abandoned to the worms for no good reason.” He tapped the box in his hands. “In this palace I have gathered alchemists, warriors, artists and seers the like of which the world has never seen. I will not simply abandon them to the cruel predations of nature.”

The guests grinned ecstatically at this impassioned speech and several of them began to applaud, despite having no idea what the prince was talking about.

“A thing of beauty must be saved for all eternity,” cried Sigvald, twisting a catch on the side of the box and causing the front panel to drop onto the table with a clatter.

The guests all leant forward to see what was in the box.

Baron Schüler grimaced in disgust, but the other guests roared their

approval.

Clamped in place by a crown of copper foils was the severed head of Doctor Rusas Schliemann. His eyes were wide with terror as he surveyed the banquet hall and as the applause grew, the doctor's head started to scream uncontrollably.

Sigvald waved at the stern figure of Víga-Barói and his entourage. "Through the blending of alchemy and surgery, we have managed to preserve one of the greatest scientific minds of the age." He raised his voice to be heard over the doctor's desperate screams. "Doctor Rusas Schliemann was dying. Nature had abandoned his genius to decay and decrepitude, but I have preserved it. Now, his wisdom will live forever."

As the screams cut through the applause, the baron turned away in horror. He saw that he was not the only one who lacked Sigvald's enthusiasm for the new toy. Oddrún had his hooded head in his hands and was shaking with emotion. Is he crying, wondered the baron, confused by the chancellor's display of compassion. Then he noticed the princess. Unlike the others, she had remained seated, and had not joined in with the applause. Her face was still hidden behind her veil, but she was drumming her fingers on the marble table with such ferocity that her anger was unmistakable.

The princess seemed to realise she was being studied and looked over in the baron's direction. Even with her face hidden, it was obvious she was glaring at him. Her slender body was taut with rage. Then she looked away as Víga-Barói stepped up to her side and whispered in her ear. She nodded in reply, and as the purple-clad knight strolled away, her shoulders relaxed and she signalled for the baron to approach.

Baron Schüler hesitated, remembering the warning of Ansgallür the Famished. He looked over at Sigvald to see if he was watching, but the prince was now surrounded by a hysterical mob. He had summoned his subjects up onto the table and they were all pressing against him, cheering ecstatically, stroking his hair and straining to get a closer look at the severed head. The baron had no wish to displease the prince with another breach of protocol, but the princess seemed insistent.

"Princess," he said, bowing low as he approached. He noticed that Oddrún looked up sharply as he spoke to the girl, but she simply patted the chair next to hers and poured the baron some wine.

"Tell me your name," she said. The hint of sharpness was now totally absent from her voice. It poured like honey from behind her veil and left the baron momentarily tongue-tied.

“I’m Baron Gustav Schüler,” he said once he had regained his composure, and took the offered cup of wine, averting his gaze from her exposed flesh as he did so. Despite his awkwardness, the baron felt a rush of relief. It seemed like a lifetime since he had spoken to a normal human being.

“I’m Freydís,” she replied, with a self-deprecating laugh. “That most worthless chattel of Prince Sigvald.”

“Chattel? I’m sure that’s not true, my lady. I heard that the prince laid waste to a whole city in pursuit of your love.”

The princess flinched. Then she laughed again, but this time it was edged with sadness. “You make it sound so romantic. Who told you about that, Gustav?”

The baron looked back at the jeering mob that was staggering across the table. He could just about make out the bloated head of Ansgallür the Famished. His enormous jowls were trembling with laughter and his limbs were attempting to snake around the jubilant prince.

“Oh, of course,” said the princess, following his gaze and nodding. “My garrulous keeper.” She leant closer to the baron, forcing him to cough in embarrassment and avert his gaze again. “That was all a lifetime ago. My husband’s passion burns brightly, but briefly.” She placed a hand on the baron’s arm. “Be aware of that, Gustav. It only takes one dull comment to lose his love.”

There was such sadness in the girl’s words that for a moment the baron forgot all about his terrifying surroundings and felt a rush of simple pity. “He’s so jealous he keeps you hidden away. What’s that, if not love?”

The princess laughed and squeezed the baron’s arm. “Boredom, Gustav. He keeps me locked away because I’m the last thing he wants to see. I suppose there must be some vestige of affection though, or I wouldn’t be here at all.” She leant back in her chair with a sigh. “I’ve not given up hope though. I have a last card to play.” She shook her head. “But anyway, I didn’t call you over so I could bore you too. What are you doing here, Gustav? You don’t look much like a libertine to me. There’s too much honesty in your eyes. I think I can still recognise such a thing.” She waved at the banquet hall. “What would bring an honest man to a carnal pit such as this?”

The baron pulled back his shoulders and stuck out his beard, trying to regain a little of his military posture. “It’s true, princess,” he said, clenching his untasted wine a little tighter. “I did not come here seeking debauchery. I came here seeking power.” He tapped the purple armour that covered his wasted limbs. “My body may look ruined, but I assure you I am one of the Empire’s greatest soldiers.” He grimaced. “But I was ruled by blinkered simpletons, unable to see

the truth. They could not see that we need to harness the power that flows from the north, rather than simply labelling it as witchcraft. I grew sick of it: sick of their naivety. While they debated matters of faith and doctrine, our citadels were burning to the ground. So I came north, looking for something better.” He nodded at Sigvald. “And in your prince I think I’ve found it.” He waved his cup at the writhing figures. “If I could just learn from him. If I could tap into the power he has, I’m sure I could finally achieve something. I need *victory*, princess.”

Freydís raised her eyebrows at the passion in the baron’s voice.

“Forgive me,” he said, noticing her amusement and lowering his voice.

“My husband certainly has power,” she said with a smile. “But I’m not sure he’s all that you imagine, Gustav.”

The baron shrugged and looked at the prince. He had managed to silence the doctor’s screams and was now forcing the head to recite poems for the amusement of the crowd. “He has the strength to actually change things,” he said in hushed, awed tones.

The princess laughed softly and took his hand. “Would you escort me back to my chambers, Gustav? I’m no longer hungry and it seems that my guardian is a little busy.”

The baron withdrew his hand as though he had been burned. “Princess,” he gasped, looking anxiously around the room. “I don’t think it would be appropriate. What would your husband say? Surely your guardian can...” his words faltered. As he looked across the table he saw Ansgallür’s bloated head had rolled onto its back and his huge gaping mouth was roaring with laughter. There was dark liquid pouring down his chin that the baron hoped was wine.

“It won’t take long,” said the princess, sounding a little impatient as she offered him her arm and pointed at the nearest door. “My chambers are in the sixth tower. It’s just a few minutes away.”

The baron shook his head again. There was a playful, dangerous edge to Freydís’ voice that terrified him. He had endured too much to throw it all away now by enraging his host. Víga-Barói was stood nearby, talking to the creature surrounded by long tendrils of violet hair. The knight caught Schüler’s gaze and noticed his predicament. He leant closer to his companion and they both began to laugh.

“I can’t,” said the baron, rising from his chair and backing away.

The princess laughed softly. “It’s true, you *do* have a lot to learn from Sigvald. Very well,” she said, sounding disappointed. “You can at least fetch my coat then. Unless you wish me to freeze to death, that is?”

“No, of course not,” muttered the baron, still looking nervously around the room to see who was watching the exchange.

“Good. It’s that way,” said the princess, waving to a distant doorway. “A white fur. You can’t miss it.”

The baron gave her a small bow and rushed towards the door, suddenly eager to be away from her. He found himself in a small, empty chamber and shook his head in confusion. There was no sign of a coat, so he hurried through the next door and out onto one of the slender bridges that linked the palace’s towers.

The snowstorm was still raging and the cold sliced through the gaps in his armour as he peered along the bridge. “This can’t be right,” he muttered.

“I must have been mistaken,” came a voice from behind him.

The baron felt a rush of fear as he recognised the soft, playful tones.

“Princess,” he gasped, turning to face her. He flushed with embarrassment as his eyes passed over her naked curves. He quickly shifted his gaze up to her face, but then he stumbled to a halt. The storm had twisted the veil around to the back of her head, and it had caught on a piece of railing, leaving her face completely exposed.

“Forgive me, Gustav,” said Freydis with a coy smile, holding his gaze for a moment before drawing the veil back into place. “I don’t think I brought a coat, actually.” As she pulled the veil free it tore slightly, and as she stepped closer to the baron her face was still visible.

The baron remained motionless as the princess’ slender form moved towards him through the snowstorm. One glimpse of her ivory skin was more lethal than any wound he had ever endured. He slumped back against the railings and clamped his hands over his eyes, trying to protect himself.

“I suppose you’d better get me back to my room,” she whispered, stepping closer and gently taking his hands. “You might have a point. If anyone saw us alone together, they could get completely the wrong idea.”

The baron’s face was twisted by lust and terror, but as the princess pressed her warm body against his, the fear slipped away, leaving only a hungry glint in his eyes. He noticed that he was still clutching the cup of wine. Suddenly, his abstinence seemed pathetic, childlike even. He gulped the drink down and closed his eyes, sighing with pleasure as the alcohol raced to his brain. Then he threw the cup to the ground and locked the princess in a fierce embrace, kissing her as urgently as he had drunk the wine, forgetting everything but his desire.

For a few minutes they remained there, shrouded in snow as they held each other. Then they slipped away, ghostlike through the storm.



CHAPTER NINE

A midday sun glared down across the steppe as Ungaur stood back to admire his handiwork. He had cleared a circle in the long grass and staked the victim's limbs into the cracked, baked earth. The man was beginning to stir, but his eyes were still clouded and unseeing. It would be several hours before the effect of the herbs wore off, and he would be dead long before that. Ungaur lifted his curved knife up in front of a perfect, cobalt sky. Sunlight flashed along the serrated blade. "Völtar the Wolf," he intoned, closing his eyes and tilting his face back to allow the sun to wash over his face. "I have served you well. I beg you to aid me now." He ran the knife along his naked chest, and as the blood began to flow, he wiped it away and threw it down on to the face of his moaning victim. "Svåla will lead your children away from you. If I do not stop her, the sacrifices will cease and you will go hungry."

Ungaur opened his eyes and looked out across the shimmering steppe. A sound had interrupted his train of thought. At first he saw nothing but then, shielding his eyes from the sun with the flat of his bloody knife, he saw a man striding through the grass towards him. His frame was as large and heavily muscled as Ungaur's, but unlike the shaman, he wore no furs. His only clothing was a loincloth and his entire body was dyed a deep red. Even his short Mohican was dyed the same colour. "Rurik," muttered Ungaur. Even at this distance he could not mistake the chieftain. Other members of the Drékar tribe had been known to paint themselves red, but none of them had a mangled piece of metal for a fist. Ungaur knew the strange mutation well. He had been present on the day Rurik first returned from the north and revealed his new blessing. Powerful

sorcery had allowed the chieftain's flesh to meld with the jagged lump of iron. He had never explained exactly how he came by it, saying simply that it was a gift.

Rurik saw the glint of Ungaur's blade and began jogging towards him. In a few minutes he reached the circle of earth and looked down at the man spread-eagled in its centre. "Is he strong enough?" he growled.

Ungaur pulled back his lips to reveal the nest of black needles in his mouth. "Strong enough, yes," he replied, raising his arms to reveal an impressive selection of cuts, bruises and teeth marks. "He was not easy to subdue."

Rurik sneered. "I'm sure he was in no fit state to defend himself."

Ungaur shrugged. "Of course not. The Wolf must be fed, if I'm to guarantee you such glorious victories."

Rurik's sneer remained on his face. "There was nothing glorious about that. Hauk was a brave man. I take no pride in such a kill."

"And yet you were grateful for my aid."

"All the tribes are cursed. What else can I do? The Fallen have grown too weak to survive, so we must destroy them, but it was never Hauk's fault." He flared his nostrils as though smelling something unpleasant. "I'm carrying a heavy debt."

"We're no longer as weak as you might think," said Ungaur, revealing even more of his black needles.

"So you say. What is this attack you referred to?"

"Hauk's wife is leading the survivors against you. She intends to unite the Fallen by slaying the chieftains of all the surrounding tribes and seizing back our old hunting grounds." The shaman nodded at Rurik. "She means to start with you."

"Sväla? How has she gained control of the clan? Surely the role should have fallen to Hauk's son. The one with all the..." he waved to his face, indicating Svärd's piercings. "Or, if not him, another one of the tribesmen."

Ungaur nodded. "You're right, of course, but she has broken with all tradition. She will not even speak to her son. She's made herself into some kind of queen."

Rurik frowned and ran a hand through the thick bristles of his Mohican. "But how? How has a *woman* been able to do such a thing?"

Ungaur's cheeks flushed with colour and the smile vanished from his face. He began pacing around the circle of earth. "She's confused them all with some kind of petty conjuring tricks. She's led them on various hunting expeditions and managed to predict the whereabouts of whole herds of antelope. It's luck,

nothing more, but Valdür the Old has been making the most ridiculous claims about her.” He laughed bitterly. “He says she can rid us of our curse.”

“I see.” Rurik allowed himself a low chuckle. “Hauk always said she was a queen amongst women.” He looked up at the scowling shaman. “And she means to kill me?”

“Yes. To avenge her husband and to take back your tribesmen and your hunting grounds. She believes she can use her run of good luck to unite the tribes and crown herself queen of the entire steppe.”

Rurik shook his head and laughed again. “You’ve got to admire her balls.” Then he looked down at the twisted mass of metal at the end of his arm. “It’s almost a shame to stop her.”

The shaman’s eyes bulged and he strode to Rurik’s side, grabbing his arm. “You’d be happy to see a woman leading us? You’d let a woman steal your tribe from you?”

“Of course not,” muttered Rurik, pulling his arm free and glaring at Ungaur. “Tell me what you know.”

“She plans to strike tonight, as you lead your men down to the river to fill your water skins. She has somehow predicted the exact spot. They’ll be waiting to ambush you as you enter the narrowest point of the gulley. It will be a bloodbath, but she will stop the killing as soon as she has your head. She doesn’t want to kill your men; she just wants to rule them.”

“I see. Then we will prepare a surprise of our own. It will be good to have them all in one place. Sväla must either kneel to me or die. If anyone’s going to reunite the tribes it’s me.” He turned to leave.

“Wait,” cried Ungaur, pointing his knife at the man on the ground.

“I’ll leave that to you,” replied Rurik as he jogged off into the long grass. “I’ll soon have enough blood on my hands to feed a hundred gods.”

“Idiot,” cried Ungaur at the receding figure of the chieftain. Then he turned back to the dirt circle and leant down beside the struggling figure at its centre. He held the knife in front of the man’s face. To his satisfaction he noticed a flash of fear in his victim’s eyes. The drugs were already starting to wear off. “Lucky you,” he whispered to the struggling man. “You’re going to enter the afterlife with your eyes wide open.” He drew back the knife and plunged it into the man’s chest, muttering a prayer to the Wolf as hot blood rushed into the parched earth.



CHAPTER TEN

Baron Schüler thrust his sabre at the prince's chest with a grunt.

Sigvald dodged the blow with sickening ease. He simply rocked back on his heels and arched his slender body out of harm's way. "Too slow!" he cried, spinning around and laughing as he lunged forward with his own attack.

Schüler brought his blade up just in time to prevent his face being sliced off. He staggered back, gasping for breath, but undaunted. The last few weeks had transformed him. The doubt had vanished from his eyes to be replaced with a steely determination. He had eaten whatever strange meals were presented to him, requested a new sword and even taken to sparring with the prince in an attempt to regain his strength. His skeletal frame had already regained some of its former bulk. Cords of muscle rippled along his arm as he struck again, aiming his sword straight for the prince's face.

They were duelling across a narrow, arching buttress that swept out from one of the palace's tallest spires. The prince had no time for training grounds. He always insisted that they spar in the most dangerous places he could think of. The glittering gold domes of the palace sprawled beneath them, glimpsed like flashes of sunlight between the banks of snow. The slightest misstep would send either of the combatants hurtling to their deaths.

Sigvald rolled back along the slender apex of the buttress, narrowly avoiding the baron's sword. As he leapt back to his feet, he slipped on the frozen metal and almost fell. He managed to grab onto a roof tile and steady himself. Then he began to laugh hysterically. He looked back across at the baron, his eyes

wide with excitement. “Did you see that?” he screamed. “Almost! Almost!” He scrambled to his feet and repeated the trick, almost falling again and just grabbing the tiles in time. “Death’s so close,” he cried through the storm, still laughing wildly. “Can you feel it?”

The baron gave no reply, deciding to waste no time in pressing his advantage. He stepped carefully along the icy buttress and hacked down with his sword, aiming for the prince’s throat.

Sigvald launched himself at the baron with a whoop and slammed into his stomach, sending them both tumbling into the void.

Schüler barked in fury as he fell from the buttress. He reached out blindly through the snow and felt his hands latch onto the edge of a roof. His sword clattered away from him and he gasped in pain as his arms took the full weight of his armour. He felt his fingers sliding down the ice and his pulse raced as he realised he did not have the strength to pull himself up.

Strong fingers wrapped around the vambraces of his armour and hauled him up onto the roof. Sigvald was still crippled with laughter as he dragged the baron to safety and collapsed by his side. “Did you see that,” he wailed, rolling back across the roof. “If you’d not reached out when you did...” He gripped the baron’s head and placed a fierce kiss on his forehead. “Have you ever felt so alive?”

The baron was stunned into silence and could do nothing but gasp for breath.

The prince lurched to his feet and stepped over to the very edge of the roof, holding his arms up to the snowstorm and screaming into the endless night. “You can’t have me!” he cried, leaning out into the wind. “I’m Sigvald! Sigvald the Magnificent!” He carried on in this vein for a few minutes, utterly exhilarated by the danger he had put them in. Then, finally, he grew quiet. He raised a hand to his eyes and peered through the snow. “Who would dare come so close to my palace?” he asked. His tone turned from elation to anger as he stepped back from the edge. “Can you see this, baron?”

Schüler climbed carefully to his feet. His heart was still pounding with fear and he kept a few feet between him and the prince as he climbed down to the edge of the roof. He squinted through the stormy night, unsure where to look. Then he spied a line of riders snaking through the foothills of the nearby mountains. They were the same heavily armoured knights he had seen through the optiks in the prince’s glass dome. “I can see them, prince,” he gasped, trying to steady his breathing. “They’re the monsters who attacked me as I rode north.” He grimaced. “The thing that leads them has the head of a rabid dog. He hides it

inside a skull-shaped helmet, made of brass, but I got close enough to see his true nature.”

Sigvald frowned. “Víga-Barói is right. Each year they become more brazen. They’re riding openly across my land.” Then he shrugged and turned back to the baron with a forced smile. “But what does it matter? We have more important things to discuss.”

“But who are they?”

“Did you say that one of them had the head of a dog? That sounds like Mord Huk.”

“Who?”

“Oh, no one of any consequence. A wretched minor minion of the Blood God. He thinks it’s amusing to let his men traipse across my hunting grounds.” Sigvald backed away from the edge and sat down heavily on the roof, sending a little avalanche of snow tumbling down the tiled slope. His good humour had completely vanished.

The baron looked from the soldiers to the dejected figure of Sigvald and narrowed his eyes. When he spoke again, there was a hint of excitement in his voice. “Before we were forced to flee, I got the distinct impression they planned to attack your palace, my prince. It was their eagerness to destroy your home that made me think this palace might be my last hope.” The baron stepped back towards the prince. “If they’re riding closer every year, maybe you should lead your army out to meet them. It seems grotesque that such filth should stain the purity of your estate. What if they attacked the palace?”

Sigvald looked back at him with raised eyebrows. The snow had plastered his long hair over his face, but somehow he still looked utterly regal. He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “They won’t attack me here, baron. We have an agreement.” He lay back in the snow and closed his eyes. “Anyway, I’ve no interest in warfare. The world has grown so dull. War has lost its lustre. There’s no one worth fighting anymore.”

Schüler pursed his lips and looked down at Sigvald, gauging the distance from the prince to the edge of the roof.

Sigvald opened his eyes and looked up at him with a laugh. “What are you thinking, baron? You look so serious!”

Schüler smiled awkwardly and sat next to him.

“What is it, baron?” asked the prince, sitting up and taking his hand. “Something has upset you.” He waved at the distant line of soldiers. “Not those brutes, I hope. They’re not worth a minute of your thoughts.”

The baron shrugged. “Well, maybe. Perhaps it was the memory of... Did

you call him Mord Huk?”

Sigvald nodded. “I don’t remember a brass skull, but he definitely has the head of a dog. The brain of one too.”

Schüler nodded and looked out into the snow. “I left half of my men bleeding at his feet.” He looked up at the sky, clearly pained by the memory. “There was a flock of carrion crows following him. We were clearly not his first victims.”

Sigvald nodded. “The Blood God is not the most imaginative of deities. His witless followers must endlessly seek out fresh kills to appease his bloodlust.”

“Then why not ride out and drive this Mord Huk from your kingdom?” asked the baron, leaning close to the prince, his eyes full of passion. “Take your army to war one last time. Place his ridiculous dog head on your wall.”

Sigvald grinned back at Schüler. “Look at you! You’re so full of fire and vigour. You’re becoming yourself again.” He peered into Schüler’s eyes. “Did something happen to you on the night of the banquet? Ever since then you’ve been like a driven man. You seem to have a hunger for something.”

The baron shuffled uncomfortably under the prince’s gaze. “Your speech inspired me, Prince Sigvald. Your drive to experience all that life has to offer. It’s a refreshing change from the dull-witted dogmas I’m used to.” He waved at the falling snow. “That’s why I’d love to see you at the head of a great army, crushing everything with your beautiful wrath.”

Sigvald sprawled back onto the snow with a sigh and looked up at the twin moons. “You would seriously expect me to demean myself by fighting with those wretches?” He waved down at his beautifully engraved armour. “Would you really like to see me drenched in blood and filth, for the sake of a few iron-clad morons?”

Schüler pulled at his thick beard in frustration. “Then will you spend the rest of eternity here? Idling away your time while the Blood God’s oafs divide up your kingdom?”

Sigvald narrowed his eyes and looked up at the baron. “Be careful, Baron Schüler. Remember who you’re talking to.”

The baron sucked his teeth and sat down again. His shoulders slumped and he looked at his open palms, following the lines of the old scars. Then he sat upright and a faint smile trembled at the corners of his mouth. “It might be for the best,” he said quietly, as though speaking to himself.

“What?” asked Sigvald, looking over at him.

“It might be for the best,” repeated the baron, raising his voice. “I think it might actually be quite dangerous for you to ride out against Mord Huk.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Sigvald. “I already told you, he’s not worth dirtying my sword on.”

The baron nodded. “You say you haven’t seen the brass skull he wears?”

“No,” said the prince, beginning to sound vaguely annoyed.

“The source of his power.”

Sigvald sat up. “What power? What are you talking about?”

Schüler looked up from his hands. “When they attacked us, we outnumbered them massively. I thought we would easily overcome them, but the warrior in the brass skull fought like a daemon. Even without his men I think he could have beaten us.”

“Really,” asked Sigvald, sounding unconvinced. “Mord Huk?”

Schüler nodded. “While he was wearing the brass helmet, he was like a god, filled with incredible rage and power, but for a brief moment he stumbled and the helmet fell from his shoulders. It was then that I realised the skull was channelling some kind of unnatural power. Without it, he fought like any other soldier, but as soon as he placed it back on his head he was unstoppable. He was like a living incarnation of hate. Rage poured out of him. He tore through my men as if they were sheep.”

Sigvald frowned. “A brass skull, you say?” His eyes suddenly widened. “A brass *skull*? The Blood God’s brass throne sits on skulls. Maybe he has bestowed one of them on Mord Huk?”

“Possibly,” said the baron. “I believe some of his men referred to it as the Throne Skull.”

Sigvald climbed to his feet and began pacing around the rooftop. “Could it be?” he whispered. “Surely not. A skull from the throne of a god? Imagine the power.” He stopped and placed his hands on his golden mane of hair. “What would it feel like to wear such a thing?”

Baron Schüler shrugged. “He seemed utterly intoxicated by it. As though it were some kind of drug.”

Sigvald clutched his head tighter. “A drug, yes! Imagine it! All the power of a god, pouring through your mind!”

“But how would you prise it from Mord Huk’s head? How would you even find him?”

Sigvald waved at a nearby line of mountains. “His citadel is just the other side of those peaks. I would simply march through the gates and hack the thing from his head.” Sigvald’s enthusiasm grew as he paced back and forth across the roof. “I still have enough men to make an army.” He pointed at the baron and grinned. “And we now have your men too. Víga-Barói has been treating their

injuries.” His grin froze and for a moment he looked a little embarrassed. “Some of them were very weak when you arrived, you must understand. But those that survived the surgery will be like new men. You’ll barely recognise them.”

“But Prince Sigvald,” asked the baron, suppressing a smile. “I thought you just said you were through with war?”

“Who said anything about a war?” cried Sigvald, laughing as he dragged the baron to his feet. “This is a completely different matter. If this brass skull is everything you say it is, I have to experience it for myself.” He lowered his voice and gripped Schüler’s shoulders. “You must understand that I’m no follower of the Blood God.” He tapped a circular device on his armour. “I follow another, more esoteric path.” He closed his eyes and moaned ecstatically. “So I can’t imagine how it would feel to tap into such brutal power. What a sybaritic thrill! It would be like nothing I’ve ever experienced.”

The prince scoured the rooftop and spied a ledge leading down onto a narrow balcony. “Quickly, baron,” he said, scrambling over the icy slates towards it. “You should have told me about this earlier. We’ve no time to lose.”

Schüler followed, at a more careful pace, then paused for a moment and placed a hand across his breastplate. As the prince dropped down onto the balcony below, Schüler thought ruefully of the scratches beneath his armour—angry reminders of the night he had spent with Freydís. At the height of their passion, the princess had gouged her initial deep into his chest, turning Schüler’s cries of ecstasy into a howl of pain. Even now he could feel the scar throbbing under his armour; a painful reminder of his new love. His life-long dreams of victory had evaporated. Only one thing filled his thoughts now. “Forgive me for this, prince,” he whispered, as Sigvald dropped from view, “but I will not share her.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sväla shivered in the cool northern breeze. “I’m not sure,” she muttered, looking out over the moonlit gulley. Most of the steppe was featureless and flat, but in some places rivers carved through the dry earth, creating narrow, steep-sided valleys. Birds and antelope had gathered at the water’s edge to drink in relative safety and she could easily believe that the Drékar would choose such a spot to fill their water skins, but something was wrong. Her visions were unclear.

“Not sure about what?” replied Valdür, looking over at her.

She looked back at his lined, weather-beaten face. The old warrior was watching her closely, hanging on her every word. She knew that he had complete confidence in her judgement, just like all the others had. She looked around and saw them crouched behind her in the long grass, waiting eagerly for her command. “I see several things at once,” she said, looking back down at the fast-flowing river. “I see us pouncing, unexpected on the Drékar, and winning their fealty as I lift up Rurik’s severed head.”

Valdür nodded slowly, sensing there was more to come.

“But then I see other memories, where they attack us instead.” She hugged her skinny, tattooed chest and grimaced. “I see Rurik lifting my corpse over his head and hurling me into the river.”

Valdür frowned. “Which is the more powerful vision? Is one clearer than the other?”

Sväla shook her head. “It’s all so muddled, I can’t be sure.” She clutched her head in her hands and screwed her eyes shut. “There’s another version, but

that makes no sense at all. Rurik is standing by my side with his metal fist in the air. What can that mean?"

There was a rustling of grass as another warrior crawled towards them. It was Svärd. As his face emerged from the shadows, the moonlight glinted on the rings and teeth that hung from his face. "Everything's ready," he whispered to no one in particular, avoiding his mother's gaze.

She nodded to the others, indicating that they should ready their weapons and tried to control the anger that twisted in her guts at the sight of her son. The other tribesmen were so impressed with her predictions that they had taken to calling her Sväla the Witch, but her own son would no longer even speak her name. She reined in her fury and tried to focus on the task ahead. She couldn't let her emotion show. She knew that even the slightest sign of doubt would ruin everything. "Good," she snapped. "And where's the shaman?"

The boy pointed his spear to the far side of the valley and replied to the men crouched next to him. "He's with the others. He did not dare to contradict the orders." He allowed himself a quiet chuckle. "But he's calling you an idiot to anyone who'll listen. He says your theory about this Sigvald character is ridiculous."

Sväla nodded and raised her hand, kissing the two wedding rings on her finger. "They won't take his word over mine. Not now." She drew her knife and waved it down the slope. "It's nearly time. We should move a little closer to the water."

The tribesmen crept slowly through the grass. They moved so quietly that even the animals gathered at the water's edge did not notice their passing.

Sväla nodded to the near end of the valley. Shadowy figures were approaching. The Drékar made no attempt to conceal themselves, laughing and clattering their spears as they jogged towards the river. As the warriors approached the water, there was an explosion of clapping wings and thudding hooves as the animals fled further down the valley.

Sväla held up her hand, signalling that the others should wait. Something was still wrong, but she knew this was her only chance. None of the other visions showed the Drékar so clearly. She had to strike tonight. If she could subdue the Drékar, the other tribes would be sure to follow. She shook her head. There were so few of them though. Only thirty or so men were gathering at the water's edge. This was not the whole tribe. She peered through the half-light. There was no sign of the red-skinned brute who had killed her husband. Where was Rurik? The Drékar dropped their spears and waded into the shallow water, crying out with satisfaction as they washed the filth from their bodies and

quenched their thirst.

Sväla gave her men a nod and launched herself down the hill. As she ran she called out, mimicking the staccato war cry of her fallen husband. On the far side of the narrow gulley, the rest of the Fallen leapt from the grass and charged at the unsuspecting Drékar.

The trap was sprung. The second Sväla's men reached the bottom of the gulley, several of them cried out in pain. She looked back to see hundreds of Drékar hurling their spears from the top of the incline. Sharpened wood thudded into muscle and all around her the Fallen tumbled to the ground. The ambushers were ambushed. Then, with a fierce war cry of their own, the Drékar charged down at them, led by the scowling, crimson brute that was Rurik Iron Fist.

"Sväla!" cried Valdür, crouching in readiness for the attack. "Didn't you see this?"

She shook her head in dismay. "Something has changed. This was not meant to happen."

"Well it's happening," growled Svärd, striding towards her. "So what do we do?"

Sväla closed her eyes and groaned. "I need more time."

There was a crunch of breaking wood and bone as the Drékar slammed into them. The Fallen found themselves surrounded on all sides, with no hope of escape. They fought fiercely, swinging axes and maces at their attackers with wild abandon, but it was clearly hopeless. The Drékar were grinning and laughing as they drove them back towards the water.

Svärd and Valdür launched themselves into the fray and Sväla found herself alone, surrounded by struggling, screaming figures. A shard of metal splintered from a nearby axe and sliced through her arm. She clutched at the wound, trying to stem the rush of blood. Then she smiled. The shock of the pain suddenly brought her thoughts into focus. As she looked up at the battle she realised that the jumbled mix of visions had briefly coalesced into one clear image. As she watched the struggling tribesmen, she realised that she had seen the entire battle before, in perfect detail. She knew every move the warriors were going to make. She knew that one of the Drékar was about to plunge his spear into her back, and she stepped calmly to one side, so that the weapon pierced nothing but air. Then, as her attacker stumbled forwards, surprised by her move, she gripped her knife in both hands and hammered it down into his naked back. As he collapsed, gasping, to the ground, she stepped casually past him into the heaving throng, knowing that several of the men were about to tumble backwards and create a clear path through the carnage.

As Svärd and Valdür watched in amazement, she walked slowly through the battle, easily avoiding every blow that was aimed at her and felling towering warriors with her small iron knife. She looked like some kind of spirit: serene and untouchable as she drifted through the mortal realm. Her destination was a red Mohican, bobbing up and down on the far side of the battle.

More Drékar were charging down the gulley and the antelope that had fled earlier panicked, unsure which way to turn. As they sprang back and forth in alarm, a few of them galloped back towards the battle, blind with fear.

Sväla remembered quite clearly what was about to happen. One of the antelope was about to race past her, just a few feet away. She cried out above the clamour of the battle. “Völtar, give me a mount. Let me slay these traitors.” Then, as the surrounding men looked up at her in confusion, she leapt into the air. Her vision was true, and sharper than ever before. She landed squarely on the back of the terrified creature. It galloped on through the mayhem, seemingly oblivious to its skinny passenger and Sväla clutched onto its horns as it slammed through the Drékar, heading straight for their leader.

As the antelope charged up the bank, Sväla lashed out with her knife, surrounding herself in a spray of blood. She closed her eyes for a second and recalled that a second antelope was about to change course, confused by the chaos, and plough into the Drékar. She managed to stand on her mount’s back for a few seconds, conscious that hundreds of eyes were on her. “Creatures of the steppe,” she cried, balancing precariously, “attack these godless fools.” At that moment, the second antelope changed course, exactly as she predicted, and charged into the tribesmen. To everyone watching, it seemed as though Sväla had ordered the animal to attack. It did no real harm as it raced through the ranks of men and charged up the bank to safety, but the effect on the Drékar was profound. Sväla grinned with satisfaction as she finally slipped from the animal’s back and fell to the ground.

“The witch is in league with the animals!” cried one of the tribesmen, lowering his axe for a second. A spear thudded into his chest as the nearby Fallen took advantage of his hesitation.

Sväla clambered, gasping, to her feet and stumbled up the hill, still lashing out with her knife, and several of the Drékar began to back away in fear.

“Go, fetch us reinforcements,” she howled, pointing her knife at a stunted tree on the far side of the gulley. Seemingly at her command, dozens of rooks burst from the branches and flew up into the night sky.

The Drékar muttered oaths as they saw the birds briefly silhouetted against the clouds, before heading noisily off across the fields.

Again, the Fallen took their chance and hacked into their distracted foe. Despite the uneven numbers, Sväla's theatrics began to turn the tide of the battle. Her men had rallied at the sight of her strange power and began to drive the Drékar back up the hill.

Sväla saw that one of the Drékar was about to swing his axe at her neck, so she dropped to her knees and heard him howl in frustration as the weapon sliced into one of his own men, jamming in the man's ribs and causing them both to tumble down the slope. Sväla climbed calmly to her feet, knowing that for the next few seconds she was safe.

"You can't win," she said to the Norscans who were watching her progress. "Völtar has appointed me as his messenger. He has granted me control over nature." She knew from her visions that the clouds were about to roll back from the moon, so she waved her hands, making it seem as though she had drawn them back. As the moonlight picked her out amongst the heaving mass of bodies, it seemed as if her wiry, tattooed body had been singled out by a holy light. "He has told me the true secret of our curse."

"She lies," cried another voice, from the far side of the small river.

Sväla looked up to see Ungaur, stumbling through the knee-deep water. She held her breath for a second, scouring her memory of the jumbled visions and squinting at the ghostly battle that drifted over the top of the real one. She grinned as she saw her next move.

"Rurik Iron Fist," she cried, raising her knife to the moon. "You must kneel before me."

At exactly that moment, the red-skinned brute slipped down the muddy hillside and toppled to his knees, just as Sväla had predicted he would. He and his men had all heard Sväla's command and it seemed as though the chieftain's limbs were now under her control.

Rurik scrambled quickly back to his feet and slammed his metal arm into the faces of the men who leapt to attack him, but his eyes were full of doubt as he looked down at his disobedient legs.

As Sväla strode towards him, he lowered his arm and backed away in fear.

Sväla drew back her clenched fist, as though she were about to hurl some kind of spell at him.

Rurik drew back his hammer hand to strike, then he hesitated. He looked down at his blood-drenched limbs and shook his head in confusion.

All around him the fighting paused, as the warriors watched to see the result of the confrontation.

Rurik lowered his fist, stepping towards Sväla. "This is all wrong," he said.

“This can’t be the will of Völtar.” He looked through the crowd at the distant shape of Ungaur, and then back at Sväla, whose fist was still poised to strike. “Forgive me, Sväla,” he said, dropping back to his knees. “I thought I was fighting for the survival of our people, but I see I was wrong. Their fate is clearly in your hands, not mine. I’ve been a fool. You have the heart of the Wolf in you. My life is yours.” He lowered his head. “Avenge your husband.”

An eerie silence descended over the gulley as the Norscans watched Sväla step towards the kneeling chieftain and raise her knife. Even Ungaur stumbled to a halt, baring his needles in a snarl as he watched the exchange.

Sväla’s head pounded with an intoxicating mixture of hatred and confusion as she looked down at her kneeling enemy. Her fingers squeezed the handle of her knife as she considered slicing it down into his exposed neck and avenging Hauk. Her muscles trembled as she fought to keep control of her body. She saw her husband’s face as he said goodbye on the night of his death; but she also saw quite clearly what would happen if she killed Rurik. Another one of the Drékar would leap to replace him and the battle would continue as before. She could not be sure of the outcome, beyond the fact that the hillside would soon be piled deep with corpses. There was another, more difficult route she could take though. Its outcome was just as unclear, but she somehow knew it was the right thing to do. Instead of avenging her husband, she placed a hand on his killer’s shoulder and lowered her knife.

“You’re a brave son of the Wolf, Rurik Iron Fist,” she said, loud enough for the others to hear. She looked over at Ungaur. “We have already sacrificed far too many of our finest warriors. Völtar has not sent me to kill even more.”

Rurik looked up at her in confusion.

Sväla turned her back on him, trying to ignore the torrent of images that was now pouring through her head. She heard Rurik climb to his feet behind her and waited to feel his grotesque fist slamming into her head. Nothing happened, so she began to speak. “Men of the steppe,” she called out, turning to the crowd of perplexed faces that surrounded her. “For too long now we have butchered our own kin in an attempt to lift this ancient curse. But Völtar has shown me another way. The Wolf has spoken.”

The bulky, fur-clad shape of Ungaur barged through the circle of men surrounding Sväla. He raised his staff and pointed the gnarled wood at her face. “Close your ears to her lies. She means to destroy us. Only a shaman can hear the word of the Wolf.” He grabbed one of the tribesmen and shoved him towards her. “Kill the witch.” He turned his needle teeth on the men nearest to him and a few of them shuffled forwards, afraid to defy the will of the shaman.

As the warriors approached Sväla, nervously fingering their weapons, Rurik stepped around her and blocked their way. He shook his head and raised his bloody hammer hand. "I killed her husband. My blood is hers by right but she has let me live." He glared at Ungaur. "This can only be the work of Völtar."

One by one, other tribesmen stepped between Sväla and the shaman, surrounding her with a circle of stern, determined faces.

"Sväla the Witch!" cried Rurik, raising his bloody fist and glaring at Ungaur.

There was a long pause as the Norscans considered the implications of their next move. Then hundreds of voices echoed across the hillside as they answered Rurik's call. "Sväla the Witch!" they cried, slapping their palms against their bloody chests and lifting their spears to the heavens.

Svärd burst through the circle, gasping and covered in blood. He saw his mother standing behind the man who murdered his father and drew back his spear with a groan of rage. Before he could strike, the men on either side of him gripped his arms and knocked the weapon from his grip.

"I will repay this debt," grunted Rurik, ignoring the furious young boy and turning towards Sväla.



CHAPTER TWELVE

“Ör is divided into eight distinct, defensive circles,” said the head of Doctor Rusas Schliemann. His eyes were rolling feverishly in their sockets and a halo of clockwork mechanisms trembled around his skull as he spoke, but his voice was calm and even. “Each of the eight circles is higher than the last, leading up to the inner citadel, which is a tower of skulls that reaches almost half a mile into the sky. Blood pours constantly from the tower, channelled through the circular walls until it reaches the outer defences, where it forms a deep, impassable lake. The lake of blood can only be crossed by a single bridge, the entire length of which is within reach of Ör’s archers and war machines.”

“See?” cried Sigvald, lifting the box higher. “Grateful or not, he cannot refuse to answer my questions.” He tapped the casket that contained the severed head. “Víga-Barói’s surgeons have implanted the machine’s pistons directly into the doctor’s skull. If he refuses to speak, or even if he lies, they immediately pass fire into his brain.” He laughed and reined in his horse, waiting for the rest of the hunting party to catch up. Like the prince, Víga-Barói and Schüler were on horseback, but they lacked Sigvald’s skill when it came to ploughing through the snow and he had already left them behind. “I’m sure the doctor will soon have no need for such inducements,” he continued, “but you have to admire the surgeons’ ingenuity.”

Oddrún was following a few feet behind. They had only been out of the palace for half an hour, but his ungainly, hunched frame was covered in snow. He shook his head at the prince’s words. “You murdered him,” he growled, trudging through the deep drifts to reach the prince’s horse.

“No one has been murdered, Narrerback,” snapped Sigvald. “I’ve taken all his wonderful knowledge and made it immortal.” He waved at the sky. “Now his wisdom will be as timeless as the stars. I’ve given him a great gift.”

“You should let him rest in peace,” said Oddrún. “This is no way to repay him. You should let the man die.”

Sigvald’s smile faltered for a moment and he looked over at the hooded giant. Then he scowled. “This is important to me, Oddrún,” he said, with a sudden hunger in his voice. “Mord Huk is in possession of something of special value. Something I need.”

“At any cost?” asked the giant. “Think of the implications. If you lead an army against Ör, all the ancient pacts will be broken. Mord Huk would be free to strike back at the Gilded Palace.”

Sigvald shook his head violently and let out a despairing howl. “By the gods, Oddrún,” he cried, “can’t you just let me live?” He raised his sword. “Remember your—”

At that moment the other riders crested the brow of a small hill and Sigvald finished his sentence with the word “friends!” He turned his scowl into a smile. “The doctor has just told me how easy it would be to enter Mord Huk’s citadel.”

“You’re insane,” muttered Oddrún under his breath. As he shook his head, his hood fell back slightly and revealed a brief glimpse of pale grey flesh. He quickly pulled the sackcloth back into place, and looked back at the ground as the others reached the top of the slope.

Baron Schüler and Víga-Barói rode up to the prince’s side.

Víga-Barói had draped a fur-lined cloak over his purple armour, but his cruel face was exposed to the elements. As he approached, he shivered and ran a hand over his sodden, grey hair. “Why would anybody wish to enter Mord Huk’s citadel?” he purred, turning from Sigvald to Oddrún with a confused expression. “We would not be welcome in Ör.”

Sigvald slammed the casket shut and strapped it to his saddle, with the doctor’s muffled voice still audible within. Then he turned his horse to face Víga-Barói’s. He gave Baron Schüler a conspiratorial grin before continuing. “We would fight our way in. You, out of everyone, should see the appeal in that.” He nodded to the sword at his side. “Think of the carnage if we were to storm the place. Think of the pain you could inflict on Mord Huk’s lumbering morons.”

Víga-Barói looked from Sigvald to the baron and frowned. “Prince, I have often warned you of Mord Huk’s growing power. His armies have taken possession of great tracts of your land. You have never seemed to consider it a

matter of importance.” He shook his head. “But now it would take a force of incredible strength to even reach the borders of our own kingdom, never mind attack the fortress of Ör.” His agitation was clearly growing as he considered Sigvald’s words, but his voice stayed as silky as ever. “If you wished to protect your kingdom, Geld-Prince, why have we allowed the Blood God’s legions to capture all of our outlying defences? And let our own numbers become so diminished? After the various amusements we have enjoyed over the decades, I could barely raise an army of a thousand men. And on top of that, Ör’s defences are legendary. It’s impossible to reach the inner citadel if Mord Huk does not wish it.”

“Details,” interrupted Sigvald, waving his hand dismissively and losing interest in the conversation. “Look!” he cried, pointing into the snowstorm. “There it is!” He kicked his horse into a trot and rode off through the snowdrifts. “You were right, baron,” he called back. “I’ve never seen such a thing, outside of a painting.”

Víga-Barói turned his permanent sneer on Baron Schüler for a moment, before racing after the prince.

Sigvald’s horse thundered through the snow towards a shimmering frozen lake. Flying above him was a small bird.

Baron Schüler turned his own horse towards the lake and tried to keep up with the others, while behind him, Oddrún stumbled, grunting, through the deep drifts.

“Prince, wait!” cried Víga-Barói as they reached the edge of the ice, but Sigvald rode on unconcerned, not even slowing down as his horse’s hooves clattered out onto the lake’s surface.

“What have you done?” asked Víga-Barói as the baron reached his side.

“Done?” replied Schüler, as he met the knight’s fierce gaze.

“Until you arrived, none of us could even persuade him to defend his kingdom. Now he wants to launch an attack against an impregnable fortress.”

The baron shook his head as he watched Sigvald charging across the frozen lake with the bird gliding over his head. “How can that be? He fights like a daemon. Are you telling me he’s never even waged a war?”

Víga-Barói leant back in his saddle and sighed. “Of course he’s waged war. The prince is blessed in ways you cannot imagine. Before we seized the Gilded Palace, nearly two hundred years ago, I marched with him to countless victories. The Old World has never seen such a warrior. But as with everything, he is so easily bored.” The knight paused, clearly regretting his candour. He looked back over his shoulder and saw that Oddrún had nearly caught up with them and he

seemed unwilling to say any more in front of the chancellor.

Schüler was staring at the flashes of gold that described Sigvald's movement through the snow. Then he frowned. "Did you say two *hundred* years ago?"

The knight laughed. "Oh yes, baron. Sigvald the Magnificent is not your average youth. He's lived for nearly three centuries." His grey eyes sparkled mischievously. "We should follow him onto the ice..." He waved one of his gauntleted hands at the lake. "In case something happens to him."

"It's not safe," grunted Oddrún from a few feet away. "The ice won't hold."

Baron Schüler looked round at the hooded giant. His eyes flashed with an emotion that could either have been fear or excitement. "Then what about Sigvald?"

Oddrún gave no reply but he seemed to be watching the baron closely.

Víga-Barói nodded and waved again at the ice. "You're right, baron. Come." He tapped his armour-clad leg against the side of his horse, urging it onto the ice. At first the animal refused to move, rolling its eyes nervously and edging back from the lake, but Víga-Barói kicked harder and forced his mount forward. As he rode, he waved at the endless expanse of whiteness that surrounded them. "It's not just the ice that's dangerous out here. The prince's kingdom is no longer the haven he imagines."

The baron looked around to see what the knight was referring to, but he could see nothing beyond the fierce storm. He muttered an oath under his breath and rode out onto the lake as slowly as he could, keeping a few feet between him and the knight.

The ice creaked and groaned like the deck of a ship as they edged out towards the centre of the lake. Sigvald was oblivious to their approach. He had opened the casket again and was speaking to the severed head. The bird was barely visible as it soared through the spiralling snowflakes, but every now and then it would let out a peevish caw, taunting the prince as he raced after it. As the two knights peered through the snow at him, Sigvald leant back in his saddle, swinging a net around his head. Just as he drew back the net to throw it, the horse slipped and stumbled, sending the prince flying from its back. There was a brief flash of gold armour and then the prince vanished from view.

Víga-Barói cursed and dismounted. "Quick," he snapped at the baron, before sprinting off across the ice.

The baron watched the knight vanish into the blinding glare. Then he smiled and turned his horse around, riding slowly back towards the land. "So easy to manipulate," he muttered under his breath. After just a few feet,

however, the smile dropped from his face.

A tall shadow had appeared at the edge of the lake, silhouetted against the snow.

“Who’s that?” he muttered, wiping the ice from his face. “Oddrún?”

As he approached the shape, he saw that it could not be Sigvald’s hunchbacked chancellor. It was almost as tall as Oddrún, but where he was lanky and swathed in filthy rags, this man was thickset and wore plates of blood-red armour, edged with tall brass spikes and draped with dozens of bleached skulls. His face was hidden behind a brutal, homed helmet and he carried a huge, two-handed axe. The baron felt a chill of fear as he recognised him. It was one of the knights who had butchered his men during the journey north: one of the knights Sigvald had spied from the palace rooftops. As Schüler looked on in horror, more shadows appeared, spreading out along the edge of the lake and blocking his way to safety. A deep metallic laughter rang out from within their helmets.

The baron cursed and looked back over his shoulder. The others were nowhere to be seen. “I’m a knight of the Gilded Palace,” he called out, conscious of how small his voice sounded in the swirling vastness of the snowstorm. “Prince Sigvald the Magnificent is my patron.”

The knights began to laugh harder, causing the skulls to rattle against their serrated armour. One of them stepped forward and slammed his axe down into the ice. There was a deep snapping sound as the surface of the lake began to crack and splinter, sending a jagged line straight towards the baron’s feet.

Schüler gasped and backed his horse away from the quickly spreading network of cracks. “Sigvald!” he cried, rising up in his saddle and attempting to lift his voice above the howling wind. “We’re attacked!”

There was no response and some of the other knights hammered their axes down into the ice, causing it to fracture and split into dozens of separate plates.

Schüler drew his sword and looked around with growing desperation. He was no coward, but there were at least eight of the armour-clad brutes. He steered his horse back from the edge of the lake, with the dark lines of the cracks following after him like crooked fingers.

He felt a rush of air as a horse clattered past him. The movement was so fast he hardly had time to register it before he saw one of the horned knights stumble and reach for his throat. As Schüler tried to control his mount, he saw the knight’s head topple from his shoulders. He dropped to his knees, trying to stem the fountain of blood that erupted from his neck and then crashed to the ground, dead.

The other knights whirled around in confusion. The only sign of their

attacker was a cloud of snow and a quickly disappearing line of hoof prints trailing off towards the hills. They turned their backs on Schöler and crowded together, muttering to each other in a thick, guttural language and scouring the snow for signs of another attack.

"I tamed him," cried Sigvald, riding back into view. He was holding one of his hands in the air and perched on his wrist was the bird. It looked just like a raven but its feathers were as pure and white as the snow. The prince was looking straight past the group of knights and grinning excitedly over their heads at the baron. "The good doctor has proven his worth yet again."

As the beheaded knight pumped his lifeblood out across the snow and ice, the other warriors turned their featureless helms in Sigvald's direction. "Filthy pleasure seeker," growled one of them, levelling his axe at the prince.

Sigvald seemed oblivious to the danger as he rode back down the slope, admiring his new pet.

As one, the knights charged towards him, drawing back their axes as they ploughed through the deep drifts.

As the first one approached him, Sigvald looked away from the bird with an expression of mild irritation. "Be careful," he said, lashing out with the rapier he held in his other hand. The blade seemed to have a will of its own, twisting around the warrior's axe with an undulating, serpentine grace, and plunging straight through a gap in his plate armour.

The knight stiffened as Sigvald's sword briefly emerged from his back, then he crashed down into the snow with a grunt, dropping his axe and clutching at one of his armpits in agony. Fresh blood sprayed between the fingers of his gauntlets and he rolled back towards the lake.

Sigvald rode slowly on, calling out to the baron as he fought. "The doctor taught me a simple phrase. One the elves use to subdue the great eagles of their homeland." He frowned and rammed his sword through the visor of another knight, impaling his skull and then withdrawing his blade in a shower of blood and sparks. "Look how odd it is," he cried, lifting the bird higher, allowing the moonlight to wash over its flawless white feathers. "A white raven. Have you ever seen anything so strange?" He shook his head in wonder as he planted his boot in the chest of the next knight to lunge at him. "Such an orphan of nature. So different and beautiful. So perfect. What a wonderful addition to my menagerie."

As Sigvald's horse trotted calmly through the scrum of knights, the prince seemed quite indifferent to their fierce war cries and vicious attacks. His sword arm weaved back and forth with lightning precision, skewering heads and slicing

throats, but Sigvald only had eyes for the raven.

There was another loud *crack* and the plates of ice around Schüler began to pitch and roll, swinging up from the ink-black water and sending his horse stumbling backwards. The baron grunted and kicked his horse into action, sending it galloping over the broadening cracks. To his relief, the sound of the horse's hooves quickly changed from a clatter to a thud, but he was far from safe. As he approached the soldiers, one of them rushed in his direction, raising his axe over his head as he charged through the snow.

Schüler raised his sword in time to block the blow, but the axe was so big his sword buckled under the impact and he toppled from his horse. He cursed as he thudded to the ground and dropped the blade. As the knight charged towards him, Schüler threw a wild punch, clanging his armoured fist against his opponent's helmet and sending him sprawling back into the snow. Schüler leapt onto his chest, trying to wrench the axe from his hands. Even after weeks of Sigvald's hospitality, the baron's body was still weak from his long journey through the Chaos Wastes. As he wrestled with the knight, his arms began to tremble and he found himself being forced slowly back. Eventually, the knight threw him off with a bellicose roar and clambered to his feet, still clutching his huge axe.

Schüler scrambled backwards through the snow as the knight loomed over him, raising his axe to strike again. Then the baron groaned in relief as another, even taller figure rose up behind the knight and wrapped its filthy, bandaged arms around him.

"Oddrún," gasped the baron as the chancellor hurled the knight down into the snow.

The knight rolled to one side and clambered immediately to his feet, spitting out a curse and drawing back his axe again.

Oddrún had no weapon and seemed unwilling to attack.

The knight's axe thudded into his hunched body and he span backwards, crumpling into the snow without a sound.

"Oddrún!" cried Sigvald in a horrified voice, leaping down from his horse.

The knight in the horned helmet crouched low, bracing himself for the impact of Sigvald's attack; but before the prince could even reach him, he roared in agony and toppled backwards.

Standing behind him was Víga-Barói. He had drawn two meat hooks from his belt and jammed them into the knight's breastplate. As the horned brute screamed in pain and fury, Víga-Barói wrenched open his armour leaving behind two ragged trenches in his chest where the hooks had sliced through him. As the

knight slumped backwards, coughing and clutching his bloody chest, Víga-Barói moved with lightning speed, pinning the knight in place by jamming the hooks back into his chest and stamping them into the frozen ground with his iron-clad boots. As the warrior's screams grew even more desperate, Víga-Barói drew another two meat hooks from his belt, tore off the man's leg armour and sliced the hooks down through his thighs. In the space of a few seconds, the knight had gone from a towering armour-clad monster to a screaming, defenceless mess of torn flesh and straining muscles.

"Your highness," said Víga-Barói quietly, bowing at the approaching prince and then gesturing to the supine warrior. "Would you like the honour?"

Sigvald did not even acknowledge Víga-Barói as he raced to Oddrún's side. His chancellor was lying in a motionless heap, with snow settling quickly over his sackcloth robes.

"Oddrún?" cried the prince, with a note of panic in his voice as he cradled the giant's head in his arms.

A low gargling noise came from within the hood and the chancellor gently freed himself from Sigvald's grip. Oddrún backed away and climbed to his feet, apparently unharmed by the axe that had sunk deep into his chest. The only sign of his injury was a thin tear in his robes. He shuffled away from the others and raised his hand, indicating that they should not follow.

Sigvald looked suddenly embarrassed by his display of concern and stood up, smoothing his long hair out of his face and wiping the blood from his polished armour. "Excuse me," he said, to no one in particular. He looked around at his other companions. Víga-Barói was waiting patiently next to his struggling, whining captive and Baron Schöler was still sprawled on the ground, gasping for breath and massaging his throbbing arms.

"Who are these idiots?" asked the prince, finally seeming to notice the piles of bodies he had left scattered across the snow. He stepped up to the one survivor: the man that Víga-Barói had staked to the ground. "Who are you, idiot?" he asked, as his handsome face twisted into a childish pout. "Who are you to pit yourself against Sigvald the Magnificent?" Receiving no reply, he nodded at Víga-Barói, indicating that he should remove the man's helmet.

Without his armour, the warrior was surprisingly human. His face was white with pain and speckled with blood, but it was still the face of a normal man. He glared up at Sigvald with dark, burning eyes and spat defiantly onto his own bloody chest.

Sigvald shrugged and looked at Víga-Barói. "It looks like you have your next subject." He stooped a little closer to the struggling man and tapped the tip

of his sword on his ribs. There was a symbol tattooed on his chest that looked like a cross between an X and a stylised skull. “The Blood God,” he said, tracing his sword over the icon. “This is one of Mord Huk’s men.” He looked up at Víga-Barói. “Do what you like to him, but don’t let him die. He might be useful.” Then he frowned and looked at his arm. “The raven,” he cried, spinning on the spot as he scoured the heavens for the bird. “There he goes,” he gasped, pointing his sword at a distant flash of white, gliding beneath the pregnant clouds. “Perfect!” he cried, letting out a burst of delighted laughter.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You’re leaving me behind?” cried Freydís, shaking her head in disbelief as she rose from Sigvald’s bed.

Sigvald raised his hands defensively as he backed away from her. They were both naked and as he dropped from the bed he plucked his armour from a pile of empty bottles and dirty plates. “Someone has to stay. Who else can I trust? You and Ansgallür must ensure the safety of the Gilded Palace, if I’m to properly defend our borders.”

Freydís let out a scream of such fury that it caused several of the prince’s courtesans to leap from beneath the bed sheets and dash from the chamber, clutching their clothes from the floor as they went. “You’re a liar!” she howled, flinging a silver plate at his head. “You don’t care what happens to this palace. Any more than you care about what happens to me. You’ve no interest in defending anything.”

Sigvald ducked and the plate clattered harmlessly across walls, leaving a ruby-red stripe of wine sauce across his face. He wiped the sticky substance from his cheek and shook his head in disgust. “Look at this,” he muttered, turning a furious glare on his wife. “How dare you question the will of Sigvald the Magnificent?” He shook his head in genuine disbelief. “How *dare* you?”

The princess flicked her long black hair from her face and levelled a trembling finger at Sigvald. “You’re lying! Admit it! You would only start a war for your own amusement. Mord Huk must have something you want. That’s the only explanation. You wouldn’t risk a single broken fingernail for your

subjects.”

Sigvald’s face blushed bright red. “Ansgallür!” he howled, shaking with rage and flinging his breastplate at Freydís’ head. “Take this wretched woman away from me!”

The princess laughed bitterly as the armour clanged against the wall. “Why am I surprised at being abandoned?” she cried, with tears welling in her eyes. “You’ve no love for anything. Anything other than yourself, that is.”

The smell of half-digested meat flooded the bedchamber as the gelatinous head of Ansgallür squeezed through the doorframe. His huge, watery eyes surveyed the carnage in the room and the two naked combatants at its centre. He was careful not to look directly at the princess’ face as, with a fluid, serpentine movement, one of his long limbs shot across the room and wrapped itself around her slender frame. As the princess drew breath to let out another scream, he wrapped another tentacle firmly around her head, muffling her cries with his rubbery flesh.

“My lord,” he said, as the mute princess struggled in his grip. “Is there anything wrong?”

“No!” roared Sigvald. Then he took a deep breath and repeated himself in a more controlled voice. “No,” he said, as he wiped the rest of the sauce from his cheek. He stepped beneath a nearby window and lifted his chin so that the moonlight washed over his face. “Am I harmed in any way?”

Ansgallür’s tentacles carried him across the room in a series of strange, lurching swoops. Upon reaching Sigvald’s side he shook his head. “No, my prince. Your skin is as immaculate as ever.” He looked at the food, wine and clothes that covered the floor and grinned. “It’s a wonderful testament to your virtuous habits.”

Sigvald’s lips curled back in a sneer. “Don’t try my patience, Ansgallür.” He jabbed a finger at the huge face swaying in front of him. “I’ve had—” he cut himself short with a gasp of pain and clutched his head. “That wine,” he groaned. He looked down at the empty bottles. “Please kill whoever chose it.”

Ansgallür stretched his monstrous mouth into a smile. “With pleasure, my prince.” He drew a small green vial from beneath his nest of coiled limbs and held it up to Sigvald. “Is there anything I can give you?”

“No,” snapped Sigvald, eyeing the small vial with suspicion. “Well,” he muttered, snatching it from Ansgallür’s grip and emptying its contents in one swallow, “maybe.” His eyes widened and he staggered back towards the bed. One of Ansgallür’s limbs reached out to steady him and for a few seconds the prince lolled weakly in the monster’s grip. Then he shook his head and laughed.

“What was that?” he asked, smiling as he weaved drunkenly towards the door. “No, on second thoughts don’t tell me.” He laughed and ran his fingers through his hair, shaking his head again. “I feel *much* better.”

“My prince,” said Ansgallür, waving to the gold armour that was scattered around the bedchamber.

Sigvald looked back at him in confusion, still swaying slightly from the effects of the green vial. Then he looked down at himself, laughing as he remembered that he was naked. “Ah, yes,” he said, grabbing a silk sheet from the bed and wrapping it round himself like a toga. Then he stumbled off through a series of antechambers, knocking into chairs and muttering under his breath as he went.

Sigvald adjusted the silk sheet as he entered Víga-Barói’s surgeries. Whatever Ansgallür had plied him with had left him unable to walk properly. As he staggered past the mounds of half-dismembered patients he knocked into several of the tables and sent knives and limbs tumbling onto the bloodstained floor. The light in this wing of the palace came from huge, hissing oil lamps screwed to the walls and it was almost as bright as daylight. Víga-Barói’s surgeons insisted it was necessary for their more delicate operations, but as Sigvald struggled to walk in a straight line, he found such incandescence completely disorientating. Cruel-looking implements lined the walls and body parts were stacked in the doorways, blocking many of the passages. It took Sigvald nearly an hour to find the room he was looking for.

Víga-Barói’s private chambers resembled a macabre workshop: teetering instruments of torture filled every available space, each of them draped with razor-sharp wires and bloody, iron clamps. Sigvald paid the machines no attention as he weaved between them and dropped heavily into a chair. “What have you discovered?” he asked, sensing movement in the far corner of the room.

“My prince,” gasped the knight, remaining in the shadows.

Sigvald closed his eyes and let out a sigh of pleasure. “I feel much better,” he muttered. As he lolled weakly in the chair, he had the vague impression that Víga-Barói was extracting himself from one of the devices; there was a sudden patter of blood on the flagstones and a creak of rusty metal, but Sigvald was far too comfortable to lift his head and see exactly what his captain was doing.

After a few minutes, Víga-Barói stepped in front of him. He was clad in his usual purple breastplate, but it looked as though he had dressed in a hurry. Some of the small hooks were not properly attached to his flesh and his scarred face

was flushed with an unusual amount of colour. There were also splashes of fresh blood on his forearms and beneath his long fingernails.

Sigvald had long ago exhausted his interest in Víga-Barói's particular vices, but he could not help noticing the Sigmarite monk huddled at the far end of the room. Standing next to him was Víga-Barói's chief surgeon, the strange creature called Hazül. Both of them were drenched in fresh blood.

Sigvald nodded at Hazül and it bowed in reply. As it stooped, the lilac strands of hair drifting around it parted briefly to reveal a knotted, wiry mass of razors and crudely sewn skin.

"Are you sure there is no danger in keeping such pets?" Sigvald asked, slurring his words slightly as he nodded at the monk.

"Brother Bürmann?" Víga-Barói's sneer grew more pronounced. "I suppose there might be." He shrugged and looked across at him. The priest looked utterly dazed and seemed unaware of the bloody knife in his hand. "But if he'd completely lost his faith, he would cease to amuse me."

Sigvald yawned. "I see." He rose from his chair and lurched towards the cowed figure.

As the monk watched the intoxicated, half-naked youth stumbling towards him, a faint look of disgust or fear flashed in his eyes.

"You're right," said Sigvald, grinning as he prodded him in the chest. "He's judging me. He must remember something of his past." He laughed and pulled his silk sheet a little higher. "Forgive me," he said, "I haven't had the upbringing you have." He turned to Hazül. "Does he ever speak?"

Hazül shook its head and waved at the scar on the side of the priest's neck.

"Ah, yes, of course."

"My prince," said Víga-Barói, sounding slightly flustered. "Is this merely a social call? You asked a question when you arrived."

Sigvald turned to him with a confused frown. "A question?" He dropped back in the chair and shook his head. "I can't... Oh, yes," he said, sitting up and looking around the chamber. "Do you have anything to drink?"

"A drink? No. Is that why you came?"

"No? Really?" Sigvald shook his head. Then he climbed to his feet again. "Of course that's not why I came here. I came to ask you about the warrior we captured yesterday. Mord Huk's soldier."

Víga-Barói raised his eyebrows. "Oh, of course," he said, looking relieved. "Yes, he was a difficult nut to crack. The followers of the Blood God have no real fear of physical pain, you understand, so Hazül's usual methods were not very effective." He waved the prince to a door behind the surgeon. "Let me show

you.”

He led the prince past a series of locked doors and down a narrow stairwell. Sigvald had to grip the wall as he lurched down the ancient, worn steps that led to Víga-Barói's cellars. As they descended, the harsh light of the lamps was replaced by a soft, pink glow. “The Blood God's minions do, however, have a profound dislike of sorcery,” continued the knight as they reached the bottom step and stepped into a small, unfurnished room.

At the centre of the room was hung the body of the prisoner; or rather, the various parts of his body were hanging in the centre of the room, suspended by a thick web of pink light. Each of the man's organs and limbs were held roughly in place by the glowing strands and as the energy waxed and waned, the body parts swayed slightly, causing the disembodied head to gasp in agony. Hunched on the stone floor in a pool of the man's blood was a small, hooded figure, no bigger than a child. At the sound of their footfalls, the robes shifted slightly and Sigvald saw a face that was more fish than man looking back at him from within the hood. Its huge, blank eyes were sat on the side of a pink, scaly head and its large pouting mouth was twisted down in a fixed grimace. The pink light was trailing up from the fish man's crumpled robes and he was clearly the source of the power that was holding the body aloft.

“As you can see,” said Víga-Barói, waving at the bizarre display, “I had to enlist the help of Énka.”

Sigvald gave the hunched, stunted figure a brusque nod and stepped closer to the trembling body parts, being careful to avoid the steady shower of blood that was dripping to the floor. He smiled in appreciation of the sorcerer's magic. “And by doing this, you have been able to find out what exactly?”

“Everything,” replied the knight, stepping under the shower of gore and closing his eyes as the prisoner's blood washed over his upturned face. He patted the tiny, hooded figure on the shoulder and then stepped to the prince's side. “I have learnt everything there is to know about the fortress of Ör,” he said, wiping his face. “I can now say with complete confidence that it is impregnable.” He leant close to the prince and lowered his voice. “I'm not sure what your friend Baron Schüler has told you, but an attack on Mord Huk would be suicide.”

Sigvald's smile dropped from his face. He glared at the knight in silence for a few seconds, then grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the wall. As he did so, he noticed that the knight let out a small whimper of pleasure, but he did not loosen his grip. “Énka?” he asked, looking over his shoulder at the blank-eyed creature.

“Sigvald,” replied the sorcerer with a liquid gurgle.

“Let the man down.”

The sorcerer looked at the pile of twitching organs hanging over his head and opened his mouth slightly, as though he were about to speak. Then he seemed to think better of it and closed his mouth again. He lowered his webbed hands, releasing the prisoner’s remains from the dazzling mesh. The pile of gore slapped down onto the stone floor, splattering the sorcerer with blood and viscera.

There was a faint glow of vestigial light leaking from the sorcerer’s fingers, but the rest of the room was now almost totally dark.

“Now, Énka,” said Sigvald, tightening his grip on Víga-Barói’s throat. “I want you to perform another spell for me.”

“Sire?” gurgled the strange creature, spitting blood from its mouth.

“I want you to strip all trace of sensation from Víga-Barói’s body.”

“I don’t understand,” said the sorcerer, clambering out from beneath the pile of limbs and organs and stepping over to the prince’s side.

Sigvald saw by the growing look of terror in Víga-Barói’s eyes that he *did* understand, “I mean that I want you to make his body utterly numb,” he said, looking down at the sorcerer. “I want you to leave him unable to ever feel another physical sensation. So that even if he were to put his hand into a roaring fire, he would feel no pain at all.”

“Ah, I see,” replied the fish man. As he nodded his head, light rippled along his pink scales. “That can be easily done.” He closed his eyes and after a few seconds the light around his webbed fingers began to grow brighter.

“Wait!” cried Víga-Barói, twisting in Sigvald’s grip and attempting to free himself. “What are you doing, prince?” His usually soft tones rose into a high-pitched wail. “I beg you! Don’t do this to me! After all these years! After everything I’ve done for you!”

“After everything you’ve done for *me*?” snarled Sigvald, pressing his face close to Víga-Barói’s. “I’ve allowed you to indulge your every whim for nearly three centuries, you spineless worm. And now, when I ask you to perform one simple task in return, you can’t even give me this tiniest bit of help.” He shook his head in disgust. “Let’s see how you enjoy a little disappointment of your own.”

“Step aside, prince,” said Énka, opening his bulging eyes and fixing one of them on Víga-Barói. “The spell is ready.”

“Wait!” screamed the knight. “There was something! He did tell me something that could help. Tell Énka to stop!”

Sigvald revealed his perfect teeth in a broad grin and held up a hand to the

sorcerer. “In that case, you may leave, Énka,” he said, lowering Víga-Barói to the floor and allowing him to collapse into a crumpled, whimpering heap. “My friend and I have private matters to discuss.”

As Sigvald strode out into his throne room, he was once more clad in his gleaming gold armour. In addition, he now had a circular, mirrored shield strapped to his arm and a dazzling white cloak trailing from his shoulders. As he stepped up onto the raised dais at the end of the long chamber, he lifted his sword to the assembled throng and nodded.

“Sigvald the Magnificent,” cried Víga-Barói from the foot of the steps, lifting his own sword in reply.

“Sigvald the Magnificent,” cried the prince’s army, with such force that the sound reverberated around the vaulted ceiling, rising to a volume that seemed too great to have come from only a thousand throats.

Baron Schüler felt a rush of panic as he looked up from his place in the front row. The prince had replaced his habitual grin with a stern, regal expression that filled the baron with awe. What am I doing, he thought? How could I send him into danger? Schüler knew that only an opponent like Mord Huk would have any chance of ending Sigvald’s reign, but suddenly the idea of a dead Sigvald horrified him. What kind of monster was he, to wish the death of such a being? What could be worth such a crime? Then another two figures followed Sigvald onto the dais and Schüler had his answer. Led by the repulsive figure of Ansgallür the Famished came Princess Freydis. She had hidden her flawless skin behind a dress of tight, purple silk and her face was veiled, but Schüler still groaned at the sight of her. He felt a sharp, physical pain in his chest as she turned her head briefly in his direction. His pulse began to thump in his ears and his muscles trembled with the effort of staying still. “Forgive me, Sigvald,” he whispered, feeling the initial on his chest begin to throb.

“The Decadent Host,” cried Sigvald. “My beautiful children!” He kept his sword aloft as he surveyed the odd assortment of creatures arrayed before him. Knights clad in baroque, purple armour stood side by side with jet-eyed women, whose alabaster limbs ended in cruel, serrated talons. Looming behind them were pink, hairless horses, whose heads were shrouded in nests of writhing tentacles and whose tails arched up into the venomous spikes of scorpions. Above this forest of insectoid limbs and pulsing flesh, another collection of creatures fluttered and swooped around the pillars of the throne room. Some were no bigger than bats, but others were the size of men, and all of them had vibrant, purple skin, black leathery wings, and the leering faces of gargoyles. At

the sound of Sigvald's praise, the creatures raised their voices again in an ecstatic, wordless scream.

The deafening cry was even louder than the first, and Sigvald finally allowed himself to smile. "We have idled long enough," he cried, rushing to the edge of the dais, as though he were about to dive amongst his adoring followers. Instead of leaping, however, he waved his sword at them in a decorous flourish and began to laugh. "Between us we have created an idyll the like of which the world has never seen. Whole nations of men have come and gone, never dreaming that such pleasures were possible." His face flushed with colour and he rushed across the dais, leaning out towards his army as he warmed to his theme. "No one has experienced the things we have. No one has done the things we have." As he grew more impassioned, his face began to turn purple and he stumbled to a halt, shaking his head violently from side to side.

The crowd fell silent as Sigvald seemed to be consumed by some kind of fit.

Baron Schüler frowned. As Sigvald shook his head faster, it looked for a moment that the prince was about to fall over.

Then, as quickly as it had started, the fit passed and Sigvald began rushing backwards and forwards again, a little less steady on his feet, but no less excited.

"The world is peopled with witless, passionless cowards," he cried, sending a trail of spit out across the figures at the foot of the dais. "None of them have the imagination to understand what we have created here." He raised his hand and clutched at the air. "But they would take it nonetheless."

The army let out another roar, but this time it was a cry of furious denial.

"Yes, my children, they would take it from us. Even now, Mord Huk and his meat-headed butchers are marching brazenly across our borders, edging ever closer to the Gilded Palace. They want to crush this beautiful paradise beneath their clumsy hooves."

The crowd roared again and several of the creatures began to thrash their claws and wings against the soldiers that surrounded them, itching to tear something apart.

From the bottom of the dais, Víga-Barói singled out Baron Schüler in the front row. His grey eyes burned with hatred as he glared at the bearded knight. As the crowd's frenzy grew in volume and violence, Víga-Barói remained stock-still. His only movement was to fold his hands firmly across his plum-coloured armour. He clutched his chest so tightly that some of the hooks embedded in his skin punctured the palms of his hands, and thin trails of blood began to trickle around the serpentine designs of his cuirass.

Baron Schüler was as oblivious to the knight's glare as he was to everything else. As Sigvald continued his impassioned speech, the baron kept his gaze fixed on the princess. He cursed under his breath as Freydís strained to free herself from the chain that linked her to her guardian.

"We must put aside our games and stop this abomination," cried Sigvald, shaking his sword again. "Although it's beneath us, we must ride out and defeat them. I will not abandon you to such joyless dullards. Not after all that we have achieved together." He waved to a tall figure, swaying in the shadows at the back of the hall. Oddrún was clutching the brass casket that contained Doctor Schliemann's head. "My advisors have shown me a way to enter the home of these slaving dogs. I've learnt the secrets of Ör. Are you ready to sate your desires in the citadel of the Blood God? My children, will you join me?"

As one, Sigvald's warriors raised their weapons aloft, screaming in ecstasy and howling in tribute to their glorious prince.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sväla waited quietly as the chieftains filed into the mead hall and joined the circle of tribesmen that surrounded her. The air was heavy with fumes, drifting up from dozens of ceremonial urns and collecting beneath the low, thatched roof in thick, rolling clouds. The whole scene had a surreal, insubstantial air that reminded Sväla of her visions. The chieftains were bitter enemies and to see them gathered together was like a strange dream. All three of them were the proud survivors of countless wars and the rulers of great Norscan tribes, but as they sat cross-legged on the dusty ground, not one of them would meet her eye. She took no pleasure in humbling such fierce warriors, but their fear was her only chance.

Rurik Iron Fist, Halldórr the Black and Sturll the Hewer had all been her childhood playmates, but as the curse worsened, the Fallen had fragmented into ever smaller and ever weaker factions. It was nearly three decades since the three men had met in peace and their discomfort was clear. Their hulking, muscled shoulders trembled with suppressed violence as they fixed their gaze on the ground in front of them.

Sväla looked around at the rest of the circle. On her left was Valdür the Old, with his crumpled leathery smile and his flash of silver hair. To her right was her scowling son, Svärd, still so young, but already twisted by bitterness and loss. Dotted around the circle she saw dozens of other familiar faces. The elders who had blessed her marriage and anointed Hauk as Chieftain of the Fallen; even the old witch, Ürsüla, hunched and smirking at the chieftains from beneath her rags and fetishes. Only one of the faces was undaunted as Sväla met his eye. Ungaur

the Blessed watched her with a forced, fatherly smile that could not mask his fury. His black needle-teeth glittered slightly behind his thick beard as he stared at her from within the jaws of his wolf skin.

Once the chieftains had taken their place, she began to speak. The hall was utterly silent and she had no need to raise her voice. "Brothers of the Steppe," she said. "We are cursed."

Ungaur ground his staff in the dirt and opened his mouth to speak, but a stern glance from Sväla silenced him.

"No one here can deny it," she continued. "All of us have tried to appease Völtar in our own way. Some with blood rites, and some by turning their backs on their kin and their ancestors."

At this, Rurik shook his red Mohican from side to side in mute denial, but he did not interrupt Sväla's speech.

"Whatever route we have taken, all of us have failed," she said. "The curse remains. Every year we lose more of our hunting grounds to our enemies and every year our children dwindle in number." She looked down at the two rings on her finger. "Despite all the brave sacrifices that have been made, we're dying. After a few more winters like the last, we won't just be fallen, we'll be forgotten."

Sväla paused and looked round the circle again. Still, with the exception of Ungaur, none of the tribesmen would meet her eye. She nodded as she remembered how they had been cowed. Each of the great chieftains had defied her calls to reunite the Fallen. None of them had even considered her a worthy opponent. But her visions had led her to victory after incredible victory and now they were terrified. She knew what they believed: that Völtar must have taken possession of her flesh, driving the old Sväla out and turning her body into a vessel for His immortal power. She was no longer even sure they were wrong.

She waited a moment to let her words sink in, and then continued, looking directly at the three chieftains. "I have brought some of you to your knees. I know you must despise me, but see beyond your pride. I didn't fight you out of bloodlust or avarice." She leant forward and finally raised her voice above a whisper. "Völtar has spoken to me!" she cried, causing her audience to flinch in shock. "The Wolf has shown me the way to salvation."

At this, a few of the tribesmen and chieftains looked up. There was a gleam of hope in their eyes as they finally dared to study the wiry, tattooed woman who had summoned them.

"We're not to blame for this," she said, casting her gaze around the circle. "It was never us who earned Völtar's wrath."

“Lies,” spat Ungaur, unable to control himself any longer. “Völtar has judged us and found us wanting. If you carry on with this—”

“Silence!” cried Rurik, levelling his mutated arm at the shaman. Since Sväla had spared his life, the chieftain had worn the haunted, guilty expression of a trespasser, but he had also watched over his enemy’s wife with a fierce, unblinking determination.

Ungaur gasped, unused to being addressed in such a way. He opened his mouth to reply, but noticed that the whole circle had turned to face him. All of them were glaring with such passion that he thought they might attack him. One of the chieftains, the bear-like brute named Sturll the Hwer, had even drawn a pair of meat cleavers from behind his back, and looked as though he were about to leap across the circle and bury them in Ungaur’s face. The shaman shrugged and revealed his black spines in an unconvincing smile.

Sväla nodded at Rurik and continued. “I’ve communed with the Wolf and looked deep into our past. I’ve seen the true source of the curse.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “Nearly twelve generations ago, when the Fallen were known by other names, a child was born to this tribe; a child by the name of Sigvald.”

Silence followed her words and the members of the circle looked at each other in confusion. Only one of them showed any sign of recognition. Ungaur’s mouth snapped shut, hiding his black fangs, and he lowered his gaze to the ground, suddenly unwilling to meet the others’ gaze.

Sväla noted his reaction before continuing. “Sigvald was the son of a brave chieftain, and he quickly grew in strength and wisdom, but dark rumours followed him. He fought with a skill that seemed almost unnatural, but he had a strange air about him that made the other tribesmen uncomfortable. His joy in the suffering of others was unseemly and it was not his only vice. He craved any form of experience, no matter how unnatural, and it soon became clear that his only interest was in seeking pleasure. That alone would not have been so bad, but Sigvald’s perversion did not end there: he was disloyal to Völtar the Wolf. He worshipped at the altar of forbidden gods.” She paused and drew a symbol on the ground with her knife. It was a circle that was shielded by a half circle with a line jutting out from its centre that ended in another, smaller arc. “Do any of you recognise this?”

The tribesmen nodded their heads and a few of them muttered prayers under their breath. To display the mark of another god in the house of Völtar was unheard of and Ungaur’s eyes widened in horror as he looked up from the ground.

“The mark of Slaanesh and his Decadent Host,” continued Sväla. “The symbol of those who revel in perversion and forbidden worship.” She shook her head. “Sigvald turned his back on Völtar the Wolf and gave his soul to the Prince of Desire.”

A chorus of muttered oaths filled the gloomy mead hall.

“Then it was this Sigvald who doomed us?” asked one of the elders, looking around for confirmation.

“But if he lived all those years ago, why are we still paying for his crimes now?” asked Sturll the Hearer, turning his head vaguely in Sväla’s direction. “Surely the debt was paid when he died?”

Sväla looked over at Ungaur, who was still staring at the icon. “Sigvald did not age,” she said. “His strange desires amused his new master. The Dark Prince sent an envoy to offer him a bargain. In exchange for his complete devotion, Slaanesh’s envoy offered Sigvald an eternity in which to pursue his unspeakable lusts. As long as he dedicated himself to the seeking of pleasure, in all its forms, Sigvald would never age.” She raised her voice. “*Will never age*. And as long as he lives, we will carry the weight of his shame.”

“How can you know all this?” cried Ungaur, looking up at her with an ashen face. “Who told you about Sigvald?” He leapt to his feet and jabbed a finger at his own chest. “Only I have heard this tale. Only I know about Sigvald’s bargain.” He spat on the ground and glared at Sväla. “And I would certainly never have confided in such a devious trickster as you.”

Sväla’s shoulders slumped and she looked down at the symbol she had drawn in the dirt. “So it’s true,” she muttered.

“What?” snapped the shaman.

Sväla looked around the circle. “I only needed one final proof,” she said, looking almost as afraid as the others. She waved dismissively at Ungaur’s huge, trembling frame. “Our shaman has led us to the very brink of extinction, but his learning is unquestionable. I suspected he knew about this ancient sacrilege, but I needed to hear it from his own lips before I could really believe it. Now there can be no doubt.” She stood up and wiped away the icon with her foot. “We can never be free of the curse while Sigvald lives.”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Black waves churned beneath a sky the colour of slate. Svärd pulled his furs a little tighter as he looked out at the bleak scene. This was his first voyage and, to his shame, his stomach was rolling horribly. As the deck of the longship rocked beneath him, he looked back at the square sails and curved prows of the other boats in an attempt to calm his guts, but as he watched the fleet rearing and plunging through the sea it only made him feel worse. He knew he would be being watched and cursed his weak stomach for making him look such a fool. In the weeks since his mother united the tribes, his own name had become famous: he was the son of Sväla the Witch. He was the son of the woman who had found the source of their shame and roused the whole steppe to war. The son of a prophet who had begun a crusade to match anything in the sagas. And now he couldn't even stand up straight. "By Völtar," he said, leaning out over the gunnel and vomiting into a cloud of sea spray. He slumped against the rune-carved oak with a groan, letting the icy spray wash his face clean.

"There's no need to feel ashamed," said a kind voice from behind him.

Svärd stood up and wiped his face, jangling the rings embedded in his lips. Then he turned around, already sure who was addressing him.

Ungaur made an impressive figure. Even by the standards of a Norscan he was huge, and the sodden mass of wolf skin over his shoulders only added to the impression of bestial power. He flashed his black needles in a smile. "Even your father would have felt sick at a sight like this." He waved at the vast fleet. "None of us have ever seen such a gathering of the tribes. Even with my knowledge I have never heard of such a huge army." He placed his hands on the ledge and

looked out at the forest of bulging sails. “Svåla’s crusade they’re calling it.” He shook his head. “She’s dragged a whole nation from their homes. And for what?”

Svård stuck out his jaw and glared at the shaman. “They left because they believe in her.” He felt his nausea fading as his anger grew. “She betrayed my father to his death and now she consorts with his murderer, but no one even cares. I should be chieftain by now, but she’s confused everyone with her so-called visions. Everyone thinks this crusade is the only thing that can end the curse.” He twisted his voice into a whining, sycophantic mockery of her followers. “*Völtar the Wolf has shown her the way. Her visions will lead us to wonderful, glorious victory.*”

Ungaur ran a hand over his long, red beard and nodded. “She has visions, it’s true, but their origin is another matter.”

Svård shook his head in disgust. “You’re just jealous of her power.” He waved at the fleet that surrounded them. “No one has ever heard of such a crusade. She has united the Fallen in a way you never managed to. Sagas will be sung in her name, long after you have been forgotten, despite everything she has done.”

Ungaur shrugged. “I hope you’re right. After all, there’s nothing we can do to stop her now. I wonder though, if it’s really Völtar’s voice she can hear. She’s not the first child of the steppe to be called north, into the Wastes, and she wouldn’t be the first to be misled. More than one god watches us from the roof of the world and not all of them have our best interests at heart. Maybe Sigvald thought he was answering a summons from the Wolf. Perhaps it was only once he had lost his mind that he realised the true nature of his master.”

“She hears the voice of the Wolf,” said Svård. There was bitterness in his voice but no doubt. “She couldn’t have led us this far otherwise.”

“It’s possible.” Ungaur looked at the curved prow of the ship—a huge piece of oak, carved in the shape of a snarling wolf’s head—and then at the growing darkness ahead of them. “And yet we are so hopelessly lost.” He shook his head and frowned. “If the Wolf really wishes to lead your mother to victory, it seems strange that he has brought us out into the middle of the sea and then fallen quiet.”

Svård sneered in reply, but could think of nothing to say. Ungaur was right: they were utterly lost.

“I understand your anger,” said Ungaur, leaning closer and lowering his voice. “Your father never had any strange ideas like this. He wouldn’t have led us on such a fool’s errand. The Wastes are full of monsters you could never even

dream of. What if her visions don't come from Völtar? Whose call are we answering?"

Svärd shrugged. "You're just afraid of what will happen once Sigvald is dead. Without the curse to bludgeon people with, you'll lose what little power you have left." He gave the shaman a brusque nod and staggered off across the deck towards the prow. His head was pounding with suppressed rage. Ungaur's motivations were all too clear, but his logic could not be denied. Why would Völtar lead them into the middle of the ocean and then abandon them? Why would he choose a lying, faithless murderess like his mother as a prophet? They had been lost for several days now and their supplies were already running low. Valdür the Old was a veteran of many voyages, but even he seemed at a loss. As they approached the Chaos Wastes, the stars had become confused, abandoning their usual constellations and forming strange new shapes, making navigation almost impossible. He looked around for the old warrior and saw him sitting next to the prow.

"Any luck?" he asked, crouching next to him.

Valdür turned towards him with a grimace. "You look awful."

"Thanks, old man," replied Svärd. "Coming from such a delicate flower as you that really hurts."

Valdür grinned and wiped the sea spray from his face. "What do you think that is?" he asked, waving to the horizon.

Svärd squinted through the gloom. "Is it land?" he gasped, seeing a faint, grey line ahead of them.

Valdür shook his head. "I thought so at first, but now I'm not so sure. There's something odd about it. It only appeared in the last few minutes, but it seems to be rushing towards us."

The two Norscans soon had their answer. As they watched the line grow, rolling and shifting across the tumbling waves, it quickly became apparent that they were sailing towards a wall of fog.

"This is in none of my visions," said Sväla, approaching the prow. She shook her head. "Since we set sail, everything has become confused. I see tiny glimpses, but nothing more."

"Tiny glimpses of what?" growled Svärd, recalling Ungaur's words.

Sväla frowned and hugged her wiry frame, looking through her son as though he were a ghost. "I see a golden city, floating in the sky, filled with long, empty halls. I think that's our goal." She grimaced. "I see the snarling head of a fierce dog, on the shoulders of a man. I see a veiled woman, weeping in a grand palace. I see a—"

“Do you see any fog?” interrupted Svärd, with a sneer.

Sväla opened her eyes and shook her head. “No,” she admitted, watching the thick tendrils crawling over the deck. “I can see nothing clearly anymore, but there was never anything in my thoughts about being lost in the fog.” She sensed Svärd’s furious expression boring into her, but did not meet his gaze. “We’re definitely doing the right thing. Sigvald has abjured his faith in Völtar the Wolf and now he’s hiding somewhere in the Chaos Wastes, indulging his every perverse desire while we suffer Völtar’s wrath. The only way we’ll ever be free of the curse is to hunt him down and put an end to his sacrilege.”

Svärd shook his head in disbelief. “We can’t even find the Chaos Wastes, never mind Sigvald’s hiding place. How can you expect us—”

“Wait,” interrupted Valdür. “There is something up ahead.”

“Is that land?” asked Svärd, noticing a darker mass behind the fog that was quickly surrounding them.

“I think so,” replied Valdür, shaking his head in confusion. “But it’s too small to be the Chaos Wastes. It looks like an island.”

Sväla shoved her son out of the way so she could get a better look. “I see tall shapes,” she muttered, squinting through the fog. “Some kind of spires.” She turned to the others. “Are they really there, or are they in my mind?”

Svärd clambered up onto the carved wolf’s head and peered across the waves at the slender silhouettes. “I see them,” he muttered, feeling a growing sense of unease.

As the ships’ hulls scraped onto the shingle, the fog reached out in a clammy embrace, rolling over the oars and drenching the sails. The sinking sun painted the whole scene a garish golden hue and, as the daylight faded, the island became a world of shadows and gilded, clinging mist.

Sväla dropped into the icy water and waded up onto the beach. Once there, she turned to look back at the countless hundreds of Norscans leaping from the ships and hurrying after her. This was more than just an army, it was an entire community. Brutal, shaven-headed warriors strode alongside wide-eyed children and grimacing, shivering crones. Once word of the crusade had spread, not a single member of the reunited tribe would stay behind. All of them wanted to be part of the epic adventure Sväla had promised them. She felt a rush of fear as she watched the vast crowds stumbling through the surf with their eyes fixed expectantly on her. What if she was leading them all to their deaths?

“We’ll just stay until the fog clears,” she called out, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “It’s not safe to sail any further in this weather. It should

be clear by the morning.” She turned to Valdür. “We’ll need to find somewhere to make a camp.”

The old warrior was looking suspiciously at the slender shadows on the cliffs ahead. “We’d better find out what they are first,” he said, wiping his face dry and loosing his axe from his belt. “Wait here with your subjects, Queen Sväla,” he said with a gently mocking smile.

She followed his gaze to the looming shadows. “Be careful,” she muttered. “I’m as blind as you are now.” She closed her eyes and frowned, then shook her head. “Since I stepped foot on the beach, even the fragments of my visions have vanished.” She crouched and scooped up a handful of cold, moist sand. “It’s as if there’s another force at work on this island; one that has come between Völtar and me. I think it’s this place that has been confusing me all day and now we’re here, everything is dark.”

Valdür nodded, dropping his smile as he saw how anxious Sväla was. “Don’t worry,” he said, patting the head of his axe. “I’ve managed to survive this long without magic visions to guide me.”

“Svärd,” he snapped, waving the sullen young lad over. “Let’s see what we can find.”

“It looks like a city,” said Svärd, running his hand over the crumbling remains of a wall.

Valdür studied the shadowy ruins that surrounded them. “They’re like nothing I’ve ever seen.” The ancient stones had mostly vanished beneath clumps of gorse and crooked, wind-blasted trees, but there was no disguising the hand of an architect. Every few yards there was a fragment of wall or the remains of a fallen arch. “Look at this,” he said, stooping to run his finger over the ground. He was standing on a beautiful mosaic of ceramic tiles, portraying a scaled, serpentine creature with a crested head.

“It’s like some kind of water daemon,” said Svärd, crouching next to him and clearing away sand to reveal more of the picture.

“Look at the detail,” said Valdür, shaking his head in awe. “I’ve never seen such craftsmanship.” He scratched at part of the image and held up a glittering flake of metal. “Gold,” he said, his eyes wide with shock. “Whoever lived here painted their floors with gold.”

Svärd looked around at the ruins in shock. “Could this be what we’ve been looking for, then? Could this be Sigvald’s home? He’s three hundred years old, remember, so it could be ruined by now.”

Valdür shrugged as he rose to his feet and walked away. “That would be an

incredible stroke of luck, but Sväla did say that she felt some kind of unnatural presence here.”

Svärd uncovered another piece of the picture. It showed a group of smiths, hammering at a small chain. In the next image they were holding it aloft, smiling with satisfaction as rays of light shone from the metal. They obviously revered their creation as a source of great power. Something about the image intrigued Svärd and he stayed crouched on the floor as Valdür walked further along the path.

As the other warriors filed out of the darkness towards him, he stood up and tapped the axe in his belt. “Keep your weapons ready,” he whispered. “We might not be alone.”

They walked another mile or so inland and came across even more impressive ruins. Norscans considered the open sky their roof and the whole steppe their home, so they never built anything to last more than a season. To see beautiful, soaring buildings that had clearly stood for many centuries filled them with wonder. The slender spires they had seen from the ship were the remains of narrow, marble towers. Most of the exteriors had crumbled away to reveal worn, spiral steps within, but they were still magnificent pieces of architecture, soaring way above the gnarled trees and glimmering faintly in the moonlight.

“No mortal hands could have crafted such a thing,” said Valdür, peering up at one of the towers. The whole edifice was covered with delicate reliefs. The carvings showed slender, androgynous warriors riding to war in chariots pulled by huge, white, feline beasts.

“Whoever they were, they seem to be long gone,” replied Svärd, stepping under a shattered archway into a wide, open space. Weeds had sprouted from beneath the broad flagstones, but it was clear that the area had once been some kind of courtyard. “Maybe we could camp here?” He waved at the ruined walls that surrounded the moonlit square. “It’s quite well defended. We could position scouts on the walls.”

Valdür nodded as he looked around the courtyard. “Seems as safe as anywhere.” He frowned. “It’s so quiet.” He waved his axe at the other tribesmen as they entered the square, signalling for them to stop speaking. “Listen,” he whispered. “There isn’t even any birdsong.”

Svärd shrugged. “It’s dark.”

Valdür shook his head. “The sun has only just gone down. I’d expect to hear something. Even if it was only—”

He fell silent as he noticed something.

On the far side of the courtyard, another archway led into the remains of a

large chamber. The ceiling of the room was long gone, allowing the moonlight to pick out the slender figure of a man, watching them from just inside the doorway.

The Norscans lifted their axes.

“Who goes there?” shouted Valdür, dropping into a crouch and signalling for the others to do the same.

The stranger gave no reply as he started to walk towards them.

Valdür and Svärd looked at each other in surprise as the man crossed the courtyard. He was a scrawny, bedraggled wreck, with no clothes on and a filthy mane of hair. The patchy beard that hung down over his bony chest was flecked with grey and his cheeks were hollow with age. As he stepped closer, they realised that his hair was knotted with seaweed and his atrophied limbs were speckled with barnacles and plump, shiny leeches. His feet slapped across the flagstones with a moist popping sound and his mottled, bluish skin was so slack it seemed about to slide from his bones. He looked like a corpse that had dredged itself from the seabed to greet them.

The Norscans grimaced and backed away.

“Stop there,” cried Valdür, raising his axe as the man came within a few feet of him.

The man did as he was ordered and looked back at them with a puzzled expression. Then he looked down at his rotten, grey flesh and frowned. He noticed the molluscs and insects that were hurrying over his skin and grimaced. “Who am I?” he belched, in a thick, watery voice.

Valdür looked at Svärd in confusion and then edged a little closer to the frail old man. “We’re lost,” he said, grimacing at the smell of the man’s decaying body. “What’s the name of this island?”

“I can’t remember,” he gurgled. “I was asleep. Then I heard your voices.” The old man looked around at the ruins, obviously distressed. “What’s happened to the walls?”

Valdür raised his eyebrows at Svärd, clearly thinking the man was insane. “I think the walls must have fallen down a long time ago, old man. We’ve got to spend the night on the island and we thought this would be as safe a place as any.” He paused, unsure what else to say.

The stranger frowned at Valdür for a while, then nodded and turned away. He slapped away from them, heading out through the archway and disappearing into the shadows.

“Is it safe to just let him go?” whispered Svärd.

Valdür shook his head and signalled for two of his men to follow the

stranger. “Keep an eye on him,” he said. “Let me know where he goes.”

* * *

Big as it was, the courtyard could not contain the hordes of Norscans who swarmed into it. They spilled out onto the sandy hillsides and muttered oaths as they spread their animal skins over the damp grass. As they dropped wearily to the ground, a few of them attempted to lift the dismal atmosphere with songs and laughter, but the tunes sounded muffled and odd in the thick fog and the laughter echoed strangely, as though the ruins were mocking them. In the centre of the courtyard, Sväla and the elders huddled around a spitting, smoky fire and discussed their next move.

“But this island may be just off the coast,” said Sväla looking at the flickering faces that surrounded her. “Even if the fog doesn’t lift tomorrow, we must head north. We’ve come too far to head back now and our supplies will only last for so long.”

Halldórr the Black, the swarthy Kurgan chieftain, leant forward. The long, jet-black hair that gave him his name fell over his face, but it could not hide his furious expression. “You told us Völtar would lead us to Sigvald,” he snarled, waving at the crumbling ruins that surrounded them, “and we’ve ended up here.” He spat into the flames. “I think we should stay put. When the fog clears we should head south, back to our homes.” He let out a bitter laugh. “If we can work out which way south is.”

On the opposite side of the fire was the hulking, lupine silhouette of Ungaur. He nodded slowly at Halldórr’s words. “I agree. It would be madness to set sail in this fog. Who knows where we could end up.” His black needles glittered in the firelight. “Your bravery is without question, Sväla, and it does great honour to the memory of your husband, but it may be time to think again.” He nodded at the slumbering shapes that surrounded them and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “You still have the will of the people behind you, but as you said yourself, our supplies are starting to dwindle. Things may change when people’s bellies start to ache.” He levelled one of his long nails at Sväla. “And make no mistake: it’s you they’ll hold responsible.”

Valdür the Old shook his head and laughed. “You’ve been against this from the start.”

“Maybe he was right,” snapped Halldórr, fixing his brooding eyes on Valdür. “Look where her visions have got us.” He waved his hand dismissively. “And now she doesn’t even have them anymore.”

Rurik Iron Fist shifted uncomfortably on his haunches as he listened to the conversation. His red war paint gleamed in the firelight and as he leant towards Sväla he looked more daemon than man. "Maybe they're right," he said, with sadness in his voice. "I know the power of Völtar is in you, but without his eyes to lead us, how can we continue? At least here we have shelter and maybe even some food, but if we set sail again, how would we ever find our way through the fog? We could sail in circles until we starve."

A tiny figure leant closer to the fire. It was the ancient witch, Ürsüla, and as the flames glinted in her piercing eyes, she grinned at the rest of the elders. "There's something here that has blocked your visions, Sväla: something that has come between you and your spirit guide. It might be worth finding out what kind of power could block the will of Völtar."

Sväla frowned at the old woman and was about to reply when two tribesmen loomed out of the darkness.

"He's coming back," gasped one of them, trying to catch his breath. "The drowned man."

Ungaur leapt to his feet. "Let me see this wretched creature," he said, clutching his staff in both hands.

The others rose to their feet and peered into the shadows.

"Where is he?" snapped Valdür, stepping over to his men, but before they could reply the old warrior had his answer.

Cries erupted from the far side of the courtyard as dozens of the Norscans woke up to see what looked like a naked corpse walking by.

The cadaverous old man stumbled past them oblivious, heading straight for the fire.

Valdür and the other elders made a protective line in front of Sväla as he approached.

"He's a daemon," cried Ungaur, causing even more of the surrounding Norscans to wake up. He drew his sacrificial knife and looked around at the others. "We must silence him before he corrupts our minds with his magic."

Within seconds the camp became a panicked mob as people scrambled to their feet and backed away from the willowy stranger.

"It's the island of Ásin," announced the man, in his strange, liquid gargle.

"What did he say?" asked Sväla, turning to her son.

Svärd grimaced, causing rows of wolves' teeth to blossom from his cheeks. "We asked him the name of the island and he couldn't remember. It's obviously come back to him."

"Then he knows where we are?"

Svärd nodded, still grimacing.

“Wait,” cried Sväla as Ungaur strode towards the old man with his knife drawn. “He could help us.”

Ungaur cursed under his breath as the Norscans at his side lowered their weapons. “You would seek help from this?” he asked, waving his knife at the stranger. “Have we sunk so low?”

Sväla ignored the shaman as the sodden old man approached. “We’re looking for the Chaos Wastes,” she said, trying to hide her revulsion as the firelight revealed the man’s countless, scuttling passengers. “Would you be able to guide us?”

The man massaged his waterlogged face, causing a flood of tiny crustaceans to tumble from his sagging eye sockets. “Guide you?” he asked, revealing his gums in a toothless smile. “Of course, Olandír would be delighted to help you.” He waved at the thick fog that still surrounded them. “I’ve been here for a long time, alone. I would dearly love some company.”

Svärd and Valdür looked at each in surprise. The tall old man had lost his vague, distracted air and now seemed quite sure of himself. The flaccid grin remained on his face as he waited for Sväla and the other elders to respond. His eyes were the blank, blue-white orbs of a corpse, but they twitched from side to side with obvious intelligence as he surveyed the gathering.

“Are you here alone, Olandír?” asked Ungaur, scowling at the man and reluctantly lowering his knife.

“May I?” asked Olandír, ignoring the shaman’s question and indicating that he would like to sit beside the fire.

Sväla nodded her agreement and indicated that the others should sit too.

“Please,” she called out to the anxious sea of faces that surrounded them. “Do not be alarmed. The man called Olandír is here to help us. Return to your beds. Your chieftains will watch over you while you sleep.”

No one seemed entirely convinced by Sväla’s words, but most of them shuffled back into the fog, eyeing the stranger suspiciously as they left. Only a few of the young warriors remained, at Valdür’s silent request.

“You say you live here alone?” asked Sväla, as the other Norscans stared at the strange man.

He nodded, still wearing his grotesque grin.

Svärd felt his stomach turn. This close up, it was obvious that the man was even stranger than he had at first thought. It was not just the rotten state of his flesh that was odd: his limbs were far too long and spindly and his eyes were a strange, almond shape that reminded Svärd of the figures in the mosaics. As the

others questioned the stranger, Svärd noticed something glinting on his bony ankle. He leant closer and saw that there was a silver clasp trapped amongst the weeds and shells that covered his skin. It was so fine that it was almost invisible and he marvelled at the workmanship. It seemed strange to him that a man with no clothes would wear such intricate jewellery, but before he could think any further about it, an angry voice dragged him back to the conversation.

“How could he not remember how he got here?” asked Ungaur, looking around the fire in disbelief. “He’s lying.”

“I assure you,” said Olandír, choking slightly on the fluid in his throat. “My memory is coming back to me, even as we speak.” He looked anxiously at Sväla, obviously sensing that she was the leader of the group. “I’m sure that by tomorrow, I will be able to remember more.” He closed his eyes and ran a hand through the sandy mass of weeds and hair that covered his head. “There are maps here somewhere,” he said, opening his blank eyes and flashing his gums again. “If you let me bed down with you here tonight, I’m sure I could lead you to them in the morning.”

Ungaur threw his hands up in despair and turned to the other elders. “How can we sit here listening to this? He’ll slit our throats while we sleep.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” said Olandír, shaking his head in horror at the shaman’s words. He turned to Sväla with a pleading note in his voice. “Give me until the morning, I beg you, and I promise I’ll help. I was asleep when you arrived.” He shook his head, scattering water and insects across the ground. “I think I must have been ill, but now my thoughts are getting clearer. I’m sure I can help you reach your destination.” He looked anxiously at Sväla. “If you could just do me one small favour.”

Sväla’s eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

“It’s nothing really,” said Olandír with a nervous shrug. “I’m just so lonely here.” He looked around at the gloomy ruins and then back at Sväla. “If you agree to take me with you, as a navigator, I could show you the route north, to the Wastes, and escape this place.”

Sväla was clearly surprised by the man’s request but, despite the chorus of gasps from the other elders, she nodded. “Let’s see what you can remember in the morning, Olandír. If you can prove your worth, I’ll consider giving you a place on one of our longships.”

Olandír grinned and grabbed Sväla’s hand.

She tried not to grimace at his clammy touch and nodded at the shadows beyond the fire. “Make yourself a bed. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Svärd groaned as he tried to make himself comfortable on the stone floor. It was the early hours of the morning and the fire was out. It seemed that everyone but him had managed to fall asleep. "Why did I suggest camping here?" he muttered, rolling onto his back and looking up at the stars. The pervasive fog left everything cold and damp and the furs under his head stank like an old dog. As he lay there, feeling sorry for himself, the events of the day filtered through his sleepy brain. He remembered the look of fear on Sväla's face as the dawn broke over the fleet and she realised how lost they were. Then he remembered his first sight of the strange ruins that covered the island. As he recalled the delicate mosaics that covered the paths, he let out a small gasp of surprise and sat up. "The chain," he whispered.

He looked around at the mounds of damp, snoring bodies. It was all too easy to spot the stranger. No one had been keen to sleep next to such an odd creature and there was an empty space around his gangly body. From this distance, Svärd could not see his ankle but the more he thought about it, the more certain he was. The clasp he had seen on Olandír's leg carried a design he had seen in the centuries-old mosaics. It was hard to say why, but in the still of the night, that simple fact seemed immensely important. He closed his eyes and tried to recall the faded images Valdür had found. As the illustrations filled his thoughts he saw the strange smiths quite clearly, surveying their handiwork with pride: a slender chain, emanating immense waves of power, so that as they raised it aloft it seemed like they had created a new sun.

"It couldn't be the same thing, could it?" he whispered, staring at the sleeping stranger. Could the beautiful chain have lain undiscovered on the island for centuries, only to be found by such a repulsive being? He looked at the glowing embers of the fire and saw that the elders were all asleep. Even Valdür was sprawled across the flagstones, snoring merrily to himself. I'll tell them first thing tomorrow, Svärd decided, lying down again and closing his eyes. As he lay there, unable to sleep, visions of the beautiful chain needled at his thoughts, and after a few minutes he sat up again with an annoyed sigh, more awake than ever.

He looked up at the crumbling walls that surrounded the courtyard. Valdür had posted sentries, but those he could see all had their backs to him, facing out to the surrounding hills. He considered telling one of the guards about the chain but then decided that they would think he was mad. He remembered that he had only seen a fragment of a clasp, and that it might not even be the same piece of jewellery. "And what if it is?" he whispered. However he tried, though, he could not put the chain out of his mind. The more he thought about the image in the mosaic, the more he began to think the chain was some kind of powerful

weapon. He looked over at his sleeping mother and felt a rush of anger. Maybe the chain would enable him to finally take his rightful place in the tribe?

Svärd decided that he would never rest until he could convince himself that it was not the same piece of jewellery. He crawled slowly through the sleeping tribesmen towards Olandír. As he reached the edge of the empty space that surrounded the stranger, he saw a glint of metal on the sleeping man's ankle. He nodded, relieved to find that he had not imagined the thing, but it was too far away for him to make out any details. He looked around to make sure he was not being watched, conscious of how ridiculous he must look, and crept to the man's side.

Olandír was gurgling and belching, but he seemed fast asleep, so Svärd edged closer, trying to move as quietly as possible. As he lowered his face to the old man's ankle he saw the silver clasp, peeping out from beneath a mound of seaweed. He felt a rush of excitement. As he had suspected, the sun and moon device engraved into the metal was exactly the same as the one on the bracelet in the mosaic. His eyes widened as he reached out to trace his finger over it. Norscan metalwork consisted of crude, functional lumps of iron and Svärd had never seen such a delicate, beautiful piece as this.

As his finger brushed against the clasp, it popped open with a faint *click*.

Svärd flinched as the silver chain slid from Olandír's leg and tinkled onto the stone floor. The sound echoed faintly through the dark and he looked at Olandír's face to see if he was still asleep.

The old man's blank eyes were fixed on Svärd and his sagging mouth was stretched in a wide grin.

"I'm sorry," whispered Svärd, suddenly terrified. He looked around to see if anyone was watching.

Olandír did not answer, but climbed to his feet instead and stretched out his long limbs with a satisfied yawn. As he stretched, his yawn became a moan of pleasure.

Svärd picked the bracelet up from the floor and held it up to the old man. "It's not broken," he said. "I can fix it back on, if you..." His words trailed off as realised that Olandír looked even stranger than before. As he stretched his limbs, they began to elongate and twist. His frail, grey body bulged and swelled like ripening fruit and his muscles began to ripple and spread across his widening chest.

As Svärd backed away in shock, the wet tearing sound emanating from Olandír's flesh woke up those sleeping nearest to him. As the old man grew in stature, growing several feet in a few seconds, horrified cries echoed through the

fog. The Norscans were being dragged from their dreams to find a grotesque giant leering down at them.

“Valdür!” yelled Svärd, with a note of panic in his voice.

Over by the remains of the fire, the elders began to stir.

In less than a minute, the old man had doubled in size and he was still growing. As his bones cracked and realigned, a huge leathery crest sprouted from his back and arched out from his spine and over his scalp, like the fin of a sea creature. Olandír’s groans of pleasure grew in volume and became an avian screech that echoed around the courtyard. As his arms stretched and undulated, his legs melted into a single, thick tail that began writhing, snake-like across the flagstones.

Svärd gasped in horror as he saw that the old man’s head was changing too. His skull had snapped itself into a long, bovine snout and his beard had become a nest of tentacles that twisted and rippled. The boy looked down at the tiny, insignificant-looking chain in his fist and shook his head.

The screams of panic grew in volume as more of the Norscans clambered to their feet.

“We’re being attacked!” cried someone.

As the commotion grew, an axe span out of the crowd and thudded into the monster’s burgeoning muscles.

Olandír stopped screeching and looked down at the weapon in his chest, then he turned to the crowd edging towards him, as though noticing them for the first time. He singled out the man who had hurled the weapon and lashed out at him with his tail.

The tribesman died with a strangled cough as the tail smashed his chest to a pulp and sent him tumbling across the ground.

More axes and spears flew up at the monster. Some sank into Olandír’s moist flesh, but most bounced off—deflected by the thick, silvery scales that had sprouted from his still-growing body.

“What happened?” cried Sväla, as she and the other elders reached Svärd’s side.

Svärd shook his head in fear and confusion and held out the chain to his mother. “It was an accident. I removed this and he began to change.”

Sväla took the sparkling metal and frowned at it. “What do you mean? Who began to change?”

“Olandír,” gasped the boy, pointing up at the towering monster. “This is the old man.”

“Watch out!” cried Valdür, shoving them both aside as the monster’s tail

swept across the courtyard, knocking dozens of Norscans from their feet.

A blur of red muscle charged past them as Rurik Iron Fist launched himself at the monster. He let out a roar as he scrambled up Olandír's tail and slammed his mutant fist into the creature's belly.

Olandír was now twenty feet tall and still growing, but the force of Rurik's hammer blow doubled him over in pain and sent him crashing down onto the flagstones.

Rurik rolled clear just in time to avoid Olandír's tail as it pounded onto the ground, then he drew back his metal-infused fist for another punch.

The chieftain's bravery roused some of the other Norscans to action and as the monster tried to rise, it found itself straining beneath the weight of dozens of burly, fur-clad warriors.

Svärd saw his chance to redeem himself and leapt onto the creature's back along with the others. He landed awkwardly on its thick scales but managed to draw his knife without falling off, clutching onto a spiny fin with his other hand.

Svärd's battle cry was drowned out by an ear-splitting screech as the monster lurched back up from the ground, flexing its multiplying muscles and shrugging its attackers off as easily as if they were children.

Svärd was hurled through the air and slammed into the nearest wall with a *crunch*. He slid down onto the flagstones and lay still.

As the monster's screaming caw grew in rage and volume, it reared up over the Norscans, even larger than before.

"Back!" cried Valdür, waving his spear to the mist-shrouded hills. "We can't kill *that*. Get out of the ruins."

A few of the tribesmen refused the order, continuing to hack at the monster's tail with their axes and hurl spears at its writhing torso, but most were all too glad to flee. As Olandír continued to grow, he let out another agonised screech, clawing at the weapons that had pierced his chest.

"Svärd!" cried Valdür, spotting the boy's unconscious body, sprawled on the ground behind the monster. With Sväla racing after him, he dodged between Olandír's blows and dropped down beside Svärd, lifting his head up from the floor.

The boy's face was drenched with blood from a deep gash in his forehead and his eyes rolled wildly as they tried to fix on Valdür's face.

"Svärd," gasped Sväla as she dropped beside them and saw the dazed expression on the boy's face. "Is he all right?"

Valdür shook his head and was about to reply, when a deafening screech sliced through the fog.

They turned to see Olandír looming over them. The other Norscans had mostly vanished into the night, but Valdür, Sväla and the boy were trapped: by the monster on one side and the wall on the other. Olandír was drunk on pain and newfound power. As he swayed back and forth, his white eyes gleamed and flashed in the moonlight and his serpentine tail lashed out at the few tribesmen who were still trying to hack chunks out of it. His huge jaws spread in a grin as he looked down at the three figures trapped by the wall. With the fog spiralling around him like a cloak, he drew back one of his scaled fists and punched it down towards them.

Valdür and Sväla shoved the boy aside as the monster's fist vaporised the floor where he had been lying.

There was a rumbling *crash* as the monster drew back his fist, leaving the flagstones to collapse into a void.

Sväla and the others tumbled into the hole and disappeared from view.

They plunged through a cloud of dust and slammed onto a dirt floor. Sväla choked and spluttered as she clambered to her feet and looked around for the others. They had dropped into some kind of crypt. The shaft of moonlight that followed them through the hole revealed a series of crumbling stone arches, trailing away into the darkness. Valdür was a few feet away. He was covered in grey dust and resembled a ghost, groaning as he lurched towards her, with Svärd slumped over his broad shoulders.

There was another explosion of stone as the monster's fist came crashing down through the hole, pounding into the floor of the crypt with such force that Sväla and Valdür were knocked back into the shadows.

"Quick," gasped Valdür heading off towards a pale light in the distance and gesturing for Sväla to follow.

The light was weak and hundreds of feet away and as they ran they stubbed their toes against fallen pillars and staggered up unexpected steps. Above, they heard the sound of the monster as it threw its body furiously around the courtyard. Dust settled over them as the ceiling of the crypt cracked and bowed beneath Olandír's immense weight.

Sväla hung on to Valdür's furs as they stumbled through the dark. "There!" she hissed, squeezing the chieftain's arm. The glow up ahead was growing brighter and they could see clearly now that it was moonlight.

Valdür grunted in acknowledgement and hurried towards it.

"Will he live?" asked Sväla as they tumbled out onto the hillside, gulping down the dust-free air.

Valdür looked at Svärd and frowned. Then he nodded at the silver expanse

spread out below them. The Norscans were gathering in their thousands at the edge of the sea, looking back in horror at the enormous being rising up from the ruins. “We need to join the others. Then we can examine his wounds.”

“No!” cried Sväla wrenching the boy from Valdür’s shoulders and putting him down on the grass. “I’ll not lose him too.”

“I’m fine,” groaned Svärd with a crooked sneer, swaying slightly as he tried to stand. “The prophet’s son will fight again.” His face was completely drained of colour and there was a gleaming patch of bone visible in the centre of his forehead, but his pride was unshaken.

Sväla wiped the sneer from his face with a fierce slap. “What were you thinking, you stupid child?” She was trembling with rage as she waved the silver chain in front of his face.

Svärd lolled back from the impact of the blow. Only his mother’s furious grip held him upright. He spat some blood on the ground and glared back at her, then he gestured weakly down to the crowd of figures on the beach. “Looks like Ungaur has changed his mind about sailing in the fog.”

Valdür looked back at the sea and saw that some of the tribesmen were hauling themselves onto the longships. “We need to get down there,” he said, gesturing back at the frenzied monster. “Or stay here and keep that thing company for the rest of eternity.”

They stumbled down over the dunes, with Svärd slung between them, doing his best to run. Behind them, Olandír was still screeching and thrashing furiously around the ruins as a small group of determined Norscans continued hacking at his rippling flesh.

“To the ships,” cried Sväla as the crowd on the beach turned in their direction. “All of you!”

No one needed much encouragement and there was soon a stampede of wide-eyed people sprinting through the surf towards the drifting shadows of the longships.

Valdür dragged Sväla and her son up onto the deck of their ship, then he clamped his hands over his ears as the screams of the monster suddenly rose in pitch.

As the oarsmen rushed over to their benches, Sväla rushed aft and looked back at the island.

Olandír no longer looked as though he belonged on land at all. His writhing mass of scales and fins resembled a horror from the ocean’s darkest depths. He was snaking down the sand dunes towards the beach, reaching out to the ships as they upped anchor and sliced out through the tumbling waves.

Sväla noticed a flash of colour on its face. “Rurik,” she said, her voice hoarse with shock.

The chieftain had clambered up Olandír’s neck and, as Sväla looked on in amazement, he pounded his metal fist into the monster’s blank left eye. Blood bubbled over him in great gouts as the creature staggered back in pain. It clamped a hand over the bloody mess, but Rurik had already swung across its snout and punched again, blinding the other eye.

As Olandír lurched and writhed in agony, the red-skinned figure of Rurik could still be seen, silhouetted in front of the moon as he grasped the monster’s crest in one hand and raised his bloody fist to the heavens.

Sväla raised her own fist in a silent reply, as the sails behind her unfurled and snapped full of wind, hurling her out to sea.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Víga-Barói moaned with pleasure and looked down at his chest. A fist-sized chunk of rock had punched through his cuirass and embedded itself deep between his ribs. He stumbled to a halt, ignoring the torrent of figures that barged past him as he studied the gaping wound. He smiled as though he were studying a beautiful flower. Some of his ribs had burst through his skin and as he fingered the shattered bones his nerves screamed in agony. “My prince,” he muttered, his voice trembling with gratitude.

All around him the Decadent Host were disintegrating: wings tore loose from hunched backs, purple bellies exploded in showers of viscera and bestial heads span clear of their severed necks. As the garish army collapsed and died along the slender bridge, the towering fortress of Ör poured lethal light over them, belching luminous death on the mutated creatures and armour-clad knights.

“Faster,” roared Víga-Barói, levelling his sword at the skull-clad tower. “Outrun the guns.”

It seemed impossible that any of them could reach the far end of the bridge. It was half a mile long and only wide enough for four of them to march abreast. The structure was already deep with corpses and the crimson lake below was a soup of bodies and broken limbs. Despite this, the monsters rallied again at Víga-Barói’s signal and surged forward, scrambling across the carcasses of their fallen brothers.

Blood-red lights glimmered on the walls of the distant citadel as Mord

Huk's men dragged another huge gun into view. Even at this distance it was clear that the cannon was as much animal as machine. Its barrel pulsed and twitched with life and as it was wheeled into place it whined and hissed as though it were in pain. There was a loud *crack* and it sprayed energy in all directions, eviscerating the stunted figures huddled around it and launching another lurid blast down on the advancing army.

As the light washed over them, Sigvald's warriors howled with delight. Rather than destroying them, this gout rippled their flesh into strange, revolting new shapes, leaving them twitching and giggling as they unfurled their new forms across the mounds of dead.

Víga-Barói leapt over the piles of tentacles and undulating flesh and bellowed a wordless war cry, rallying the army once more. The depraved hordes charged after him, undaunted by the carnage. The knight lifted the visor of his helmet and looked back over his shoulder. He nodded at a gaunt, bearded man a few feet away, stumbling through the mass of shivering limbs and liquid faces. "You're a man after my own heart, Baron Schüler," he cried.

The baron looked back at him with a dazed expression. He was clad in the ornate purple and gold armour Sigvald had given him and, as he blundered through the chaos, he held a mirrored shield over his head that was a perfect replica of the prince's, but every inch of him was drenched in blood and parts of his armour had rippled into strange, awkward new shapes where the blasts of light had glanced across it. "What?" he croaked.

Víga-Barói waved his sword at the nightmarish abattoir that surrounded them. "I have to admit, I told Prince Sigvald that you were mad for suggesting this." He gasped as a horned creature barged past him, jolting his fractured ribs. Then he sighed with pleasure. "But I'm beginning to believe you might be some kind of genius."

Schüler grimaced as a blossom of writhing intestines erupted in front of him. He lashed out with his sword, cursing his own name as he hacked the shuddering entrails to the ground and continued racing after the sneering knight. All around him were the men he had led north from the Empire. They had left their homes, at his command, only a year earlier, and now he could not bear to look at what had become of them. As he had whiled away the weeks in Sigvald's urbane company, his men had been strapped to slabs and hacked into grotesque new shapes in Víga-Barói's surgeries. Even with his gaze fixed firmly on the citadel he knew he would never reach, Schüler could not help catching glimpses of his men's blanched, elongated faces or their leathery, razor-sharp appendages. He ran faster, trying to leave them behind, but they hurried dutifully after him,

eager to march by his side into the mayhem ahead.

The baron's heart pounded as he slipped and scrambled after Víga-Barói and he began to moan in despair, tormented by the fact that they were all going to die, apart from the one person he wanted to see dead.

Sigvald was crawling slowly across the side of a mountain. "Don't move," he hissed to the row of knights waiting a few feet back down the slope. The prince held his breath as he edged carefully towards the precipice, jutting out of the snow, halfway up the slope. He looked up at the cloudy sky and then waited in silence, crouching patiently on the exposed lump of rock. After a few minutes, the clouds rolled back from the moon and a cold light washed over the mountainside, revealing a flash of green in front of the prince. Sigvald leant forward until his face was just inches from the stone. Then his handsome face lit up in a broad grin. "Perfect," he muttered, reaching out and nudging a small emerald shape onto one of his fingers and holding it up before him. It was a tiny iridescent beetle, with a human eye embedded in its back that stared defiantly at the prince. "Look at this!" Sigvald hissed, turning to his men, but his breath dislodged the beetle and it fluttered away from his hand with a whirring sound.

Sigvald's grin froze before slowly turning into a grimace. He massaged his forehead so vigorously it seemed as though he were trying to remove his own scalp. Then he stood up and turned into the icy breeze whistling across the face of the mountain. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a few seconds. Then he waved at a row of wagons behind the knights. "Unfasten them," he snapped, looking out into the storm.

Below them, at the foot of the mountain, was a huge red lake. The colour jarred horribly against the virgin white snow, but Sigvald was not interested in the broad expanse of blood, he peered instead at the slender black bridge leading to a citadel in its centre, and the crowds of figures struggling to cross it.

"Oddrún," he called out. "Bring me the head."

As the knights began to uncover the large, circular wagons, the teetering, hooded figure of the chancellor lurched past them, with the gold casket wedged under his arm. It took him a few minutes to reach Sigvald's side and when he finally reached the ledge, a stream of spluttering coughs came from within his hood. Once he had caught his breath he looked down at the carnage on the bridge and shook his head. "You're going to kill every last one of them," he muttered. "They love you more than anything and this is how you repay them."

Sigvald's eyes flashed with excitement as he gripped Oddrún's shoulder. "Remember the brass skull!" he said, with a tremble in his voice. "A skull from

the throne of a god.” He tipped back his head and groaned at the thought of it. “Can you imagine what that will feel like?”

Oddrún flinched away from Sigvald’s grip. “Even if it exists, which I doubt, you’ll never lay your hands on it.” He waved at the impossibly tall citadel at the end of the bridge, and the trails of vivid light pouring down from it. “None of them will ever reach that tower. You’re sacrificing everything, and for what?”

“Sacrifice?” Sigvald shook his head, genuinely confused. “Where is there any sacrifice?” He pointed down at the bizarre tide of mutated flesh and fantastical creatures. “Have you ever seen anything like that? Has anyone? Who could ever dream of expiring in such a beautiful carnival?” He took the casket from Oddrún. “Anyway, you’re wrong. I haven’t come here just to watch them die. In a few minutes everything will look very different.” He flicked open the casket and revealed the head of Doctor Schliemann. Several weeks in a dark box had already transformed the doctor’s head. His skin was grey and hung down from his skull in loose, clammy folds, and his eyes carried no trace of life.

“Tell me, old friend,” said Sigvald, stroking the doctor’s cheek as though he were a beloved pet, “is Víga-Barói’s theory correct? Can we attack the citadel from the air?”

The head gave no reply for a few seconds, then the doctor’s face crumpled in pain as electricity crackled into his skull. “Yes,” he answered in croaky, desolate tones. “Mord Huk’s guns only protect him from armies that approach along the bridge, or the lake. They can’t be aimed up at the sky.”

Sigvald grinned triumphantly up at Oddrún. “Then we can land behind them and defeat his garrison?”

“You can land behind them,” replied the head.

Sigvald slammed the casket shut with a nod of satisfaction and looked back down the mountainside.

The knights had uncovered the wagons and revealed hundreds of strange chariots. Each one consisted of a circular silver frame, several feet in diameter, designed to resemble the device on Sigvald’s shield. Attached to the outer ellipse of each chariot were four huge, white eagles, with purple velvet hoods fastened securely over their heads. Fixed in the centre of each frame was an incredibly ornate cage of gossamer-fine silver, large enough to hold two men. Every inch of the vehicles was decorated with delicate spirals of filigreed silver and engraved with florid runes.

“Come with me,” said Sigvald, waving to Oddrún as he clambered into one of the cages. As he settled into a high-backed silver chair, he grasped a pair of reins linked to the eagles. “Remove the hoods,” he cried, as Oddrún folded his

long limbs into the cage beside him.

One of the knights began uncovering the eagles' heads. As soon as the birds' eyes were uncovered they began beating their huge wings, screeching furiously and pecking at the straps that secured them to the chariot. The knight had to work quickly to avoid being skewered by their long, curved beaks.

Sigvald let out a manic laugh as the birds launched themselves into the air with a flurry of talons and feathers. "Follow my lead," he cried as the silver chariot lurched from the snow, swinging wildly beneath the eagles as they attempted to free themselves from the reins. Oddrún cursed as he slipped and slammed his head against the metalwork.

As the eagles pounded their wings in fear, all pulling in opposite directions at once, the chariot span and tumbled beneath them, just a few feet above the jagged rocks. Sigvald's laughter grew wilder as he and Oddrún rolled around the cage. Then, just as it looked as though the whole contraption would be smashed, the prince pulled the reins and steered the eagles up into the sky.

Sigvald's long blond hair trailed behind him as the chariot soared up through the icy breeze. His eyes blazed with joy as he grinned at the stars. Within minutes the eagles' pounding wings had hurled them through the clouds, enabling them to see for miles around. "Look, Oddrún!" he cried, shaking the crumpled, cursing figure at his feet. "The Gilded Palace!"

Oddrún looked through the bars of the cage at the distant flash of gold, but his only reply was a grunt of disgust.

Sigvald yanked the eagles in the opposite direction, sending the chariot swinging across the night sky in a great arc, flashing like a comet through the clouds. "Follow my lead!" he called again, looking down at the mountainside.

Way below, some of the knights had managed to launch their chariots from the ground and were now flying up towards Sigvald.

The prince steered the chariot around the frozen peaks, whooping hysterically as the eagles banked and dived. For a while he forgot all about the raging battle below as he closed his eyes and abandoned himself to the dizzying sensation of hurtling through the air. After several minutes, he realised that most of the other chariots had managed to take off and were now circling with him. Remembering his purpose, he drew his sword and thrust it through the bars of the cage, pointing it at the crimson lake below and the tower of skulls at its centre. "Silence the guns!" he cried, sending his chariot hurtling down through the clouds. "Death to the Blood God!"

The other chariots plummeted after him, with the moonlight flashing along their silver frames, and for a brief moment it looked as though a meteor shower

was falling over the Chaos Wastes.

Sigvald's chariot crashed onto the top of the fortress' outer wall. The metal crumpled and splintered in a shower of sparks and feathers and Sigvald was thrown clear, clattering across the battlements, losing his sword and tumbling towards the fortress' defenders.

He rolled onto his feet and staggered unsteadily to a halt.

A group of short, stocky figures stood in front of him, guarding a cannon. They wore thick, iron armour, filthy leather tabards and had long, greasy beards, plaited with bones. Their scowling faces were covered in soot and their moustaches were singed and shrivelled from the heat of the gun. As one, they drew axes and knives and charged at the dazed-looking prince.

Sigvald's weaving gait confused the dwarfs as they tried to land blows on his slender frame. He ran straight at them, but then lurched off to one side at the last minute, leaving them to stumble past. As they whirled around, cursing, he dealt one of them a fierce, backhanded blow to the head. As the dwarf reeled from the blow, the prince plucked the axe from his flailing hands and turned to face the others with a grin. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance," he said, with a nod of his head. Then, with shocking speed, he slammed the axe into the chest of its former owner.

Blood sprayed from the dwarf's armour as Sigvald drew back the axe to strike again, but before he could do so the battlements exploded in a cloud of dust, feathers and granite as another chariot smashed into the wall.

The dwarfs backed away in confusion as dozens of the silver cages began crashing down along the outer wall of the fortress. Eagles screamed and flapped wildly through the chaos and purple-clad knights stumbled from the wreckage, drawing swords as they rushed to attack.

Within minutes, the cannons were left unmanned as the dwarfs rushed to defend the wall.

Víga-Barói reached up with both arms, suffocated and blind, as a thick blanket of flesh enveloped him. His hands broke free and he grunted with satisfaction as he felt cold air on his fingertips. The agony of his burning lungs was delicious, but he knew he could not betray his beloved prince; not even for such an exquisite death. He sank his fingers into the pulsing mass and hauled himself free, gasping for breath as his face burst through a layer of translucent skin. The mound of blubber he was trapped in had been a man, up until a few minutes ago, when one of the luminous cannon blasts had struck the poor wretch full-on and transformed him into a gelatinous mound of meat.

“The guns!” cried Hazül from a few feet away, peering up at the walls from behind its gossamer shroud of lilac tendrils.

Víga-Barói dragged the rest of his body from the quivering heap and looked down the bridge towards the fortress. The huge gates at the foot of the structure looked as impenetrable as ever, but the trails of light from above them had vanished. He wiped the blood from his armour and pulled his sword free with a moist *smack*. Then he dropped back down onto the bridge. “This is our chance!” he cried, grabbing one of Hazül’s pale, mutilated limbs and hurling him forwards.

As the surgeon stumbled and fell, Víga-Barói lifted his sword aloft and screamed: “Charge!”

He looked over his shoulder as he ran and saw that half of the army was in no fit state to follow. Hundreds were dead, but even more had been mutated. The most unlikely anatomical combinations were trying to crawl after him: wings had replaced legs, heads had become featureless black orbs and spines had blossomed from backs like twisted, ivory trees. The resulting mess of limbs and animal parts brought a smile to his scarred face, but he knew it was never going to leave the bridge. Luckily, there were a few hundred knights who had avoided the cannon fire and, as the last of the guns fell silent, they wasted no time in clambering over the twitching wreckage and sprinting across the bridge towards him. At their head was Baron Schüler. His face was drenched with gore, but his eyes were fixed in a determined stare as he saw a chance to survive the nightmare he had created.

A few arrows rattled off their shields as they approached the gates, but it was obvious that Mord Huk had placed all his faith in the guns. Víga-Barói howled victoriously as he reached the fortress’ tall brass gate. As the other knights ran towards him he pressed his face to the crack between the doors, snorting and sniffing with animal hunger.

“I can smell you in there,” he cried, pounding the hilt of his sword against the metal. “The Dark Prince will have your blood.” Then he stepped back and looked up at the glinting chariots circling overhead. “How could I have doubted him?” he asked, turning to Schüler.

The baron slumped against the doors, gasping for breath. “What?” he groaned, wiping the gore from his face.

“I thought Sigvald’s genius was waning, but now I see that it’s just beginning. He’s going to bring this whole fortress to its knees.”

“Has he joined the fighting?” replied the baron, looking up with hope in his eyes.

Víga-Barói pulled back his shoulders, causing the barbs embedded in his sides to draw fresh streams of blood. “Stand tall, baron,” he said, regaining his usual velvety tones. He waved up at the silver contraptions plummeting towards the battlements. “The Geld-Prince is waging war as only he knows how, and you and I will be on hand to enjoy the spoils.” He paused as he noticed a small, hooded shape in the crowd of figures rushing towards the doors. “Énka,” he called out, summoning the sorcerer to his side.

Énka hurried over and looked up at him with one of his large, glassy eyes. “Lord?”

“Our prince is breaching the fortress and he needs us at his side.” He tapped a knuckle on the brass door behind him. “But Mord Huk is a poor host and he seems to have forgotten to open his doors. Can you open them for him?”

Énka’s strange, piscine face lit up in a smile. He nodded and stretched his webbed hands out over the metal. His head dropped down between his shoulders and it looked as though he were going to simply shove the towering doors open, but instead of pushing he began to hum a jaunty melody. The words were indecipherable but there was something strangely lewd about Énka’s tone and as the metal around his fingers began to ripple, his stunted body shivered with pleasure. His movements became more pronounced and his words more frantic as the huge doors began to undulate and change colour.

After a few minutes, the sorcerer looked up at Víga-Barói. “Done,” he gasped, already looking exhausted by his spell.

“Wonderful,” said the sneering knight as he looked up at Énka’s work.

Where the sorcerer had previously been leaning on a pair of thirty-foot brass doors, he was now gripping a shimmering curtain of purple silk.

Víga-Barói drew back the material and stepped through into a circular courtyard. He found himself walking on skulls—the whole courtyard was lined with them and they were all slick with blood. There was a constant flow of the stuff, rushing down from the tower at the heart of the fortress and over the eight walls that surrounded it. Víga-Barói did not have long to study his surroundings though. A row of armour-clad, axe-wielding knights rushed to greet him and he barely had time to raise his sword in time to parry the first blow.

Sigvald hacked wildly with a borrowed axe, driven into a frenzy by his lack of progress. He and his men had butchered the dwarfs and destroyed the guns, but as soon as they made it down into the courtyard they ground to a halt. Crowds of warriors blocked their way, clad in thick, serrated armour and snarling canine helmets. Sigvald slipped through them like a zephyr, easily dodging their brutal

axes and slow, lumbering blows, but however quickly he sliced them apart, more rushed to replace them, trapping his knights in the corner of the courtyard. He could see Víga-Barói and the baron by the gates, surrounded by the same horde. The warriors' armour was blood-red and edged with twisted, brass spikes and as they hacked off the heads of Sigvald's men they roared with pleasure. It was rare that Mord Huk's guns allowed them such sport.

"To the next circle!" cried Sigvald. "Find Mord Huk!" He levelled his axe at a second pair of brass gates and began hacking his way towards them.

More of Sigvald's personal honour guard were rushing down from the wall behind him and at the sight of their heroic prince they slammed into Mord Huk's warriors with such force that they finally began to shove them back.

Over by the gates, Víga-Barói's men saw what was happening and tried to follow. As the defenders struggled to protect themselves from Sigvald's frenzied attack, Víga-Barói and his men charged into their backs, attempting to make some progress of their own.

Sigvald swung his axe down into the warrior below him. The blade bit deep through the man's gorget and embedded itself in his thick neck. The brute toppled to the ground in a spray of blood, bellowing with rage as Sigvald rolled clear, leaving the axe in his shattered armour.

As the prince clambered to his feet, several of his own men finally caught up with him and formed a defensive circle.

As they raised their mirrored shields to protect him, Sigvald let out a gasp of horror. "Look at me," he cried, seeing his reflection and clutching his face in shock. The man's blood had drenched Sigvald's head and shoulders, staining his blond locks with thick, red gore. His usually perfect mane was clotted and matted with the stuff, giving Sigvald the look of a deranged prophet. As his men fought desperately to protect him, the prince tried to wipe himself clean, staring into the polished metal and moaning in horror at his bedraggled appearance. "I'm hideous," he cried, unable to pull the muck from his hair. "Someone clean me." He whirled around, his face purple with rage as he scanned the courtyard. "Oddrún? Where are you?"

The chancellor was trapped at the foot of the outer wall, looming awkwardly over the battling figures and still clutching the gold casket to his chest. The prince let out an incoherent howl as he launched himself at the dog-helmed warriors. His own guards struggled to follow him as he charged back into the melee, flooring one of the warriors with a single punch and grabbing the axe that slipped from his grip. Grasping the brutal weapon in both hands, he began hacking his way through the enemy, cursing them for making him so ugly.

Mord Huk's men were all towering brutes and clad in thick plate armour, but the slender figure of Sigvald sliced through them with incredible ease. None of them had ever faced an opponent who fought with such easy grace. A shower of heads and limbs surrounded the youth as he powered his way towards the second set of gates. It was only when he was almost halfway across the courtyard that Sigvald realised that none of his men had managed to follow him. Dozens of the crude, bestial helmets surrounded him as he saw that Víga-Barói and the others were still trapped at the foot of the outer wall, fighting for their lives as more of the red and brass warriors clattered into the courtyard.

Sigvald let out another howl of frustration as he saw that his entire army was on the brink of collapse. The press of bodies was too great for them to reach him and every minute they spent in the courtyard saw more of them dropping to the ground. "Where's Mord Huk?" he said through gritted teeth. "I *will* have that helmet." However many knights he floored though, he was unable to progress any further. The warriors' laughter echoed harshly in the snouts of their grotesque helmets as they began to gradually wear him down.

As the prince felt his arms beginning to weaken, he finally realised the danger of his position. Even he could not survive alone for long against such determined foes and there was still no sign of the brass helmet. "I must have it," he hissed, booting one warrior in the groin and hammering his axe down into the head of another, but it was useless: the crush of bodies was too great. Sigvald found himself being forced slowly back towards his own men. He howled and threw the axe down in disgust. Then he collapsed backwards in a feint, causing his attackers to clash into each other in confusion. As the tightly packed ranks of warriors stumbled and crashed to the ground, Sigvald span away with an acrobatic roll, landing on his feet and dashing back towards the gates.

His men had banded together beneath the billowing silk curtains to make a desperate last stand. As Sigvald approached them, his blood-splattered face was furious. "Pathetic!" he screamed, punching the first man he reached. "You can't even kill this pack of morons."

There was a clatter of metal as Víga-Barói and Baron Schüler shouldered their way towards him.

"My prince," said Víga-Barói with a low bow. "We're outnumbered. It's impossible."

Baron Schüler shook his head wildly, his eyes wide with shock and his sword hanging limply in his hand.

Sigvald clutched his long hair in his fists and howled again. "*Nothing* is impossible," he roared, yanking his own head from side to side. Then he loosed

his hair and grabbed Víga-Barói by the throat, pressing their faces together. “We need to conquer that citadel. Do you understand? We *need* to.”

Víga-Barói dropped to his knees and shook his head. “We can’t do it, prince, not without more help.”

“You can’t stop now, prince,” gasped Schüler.

Sigvald dealt Víga-Barói a fierce backhanded blow that sent him sprawling across the skull-covered ground. “Idiot,” he spat, looking down at him in disgust. The prince’s cheeks grew even darker as his head continued to twitch and shake. He clamped his hands over his head again, trying to hold it steady. “Very well,” he said, nodding briefly at Schüler and then looking back out along the bridge. “More help he says. So be it.” He stepped over the fawning knight at his feet and strode from the courtyard.

“My prince,” gasped Baron Schüler, racing after him. An explosion of grinding metal drew his gaze back to the battle. The full force of Mord Huk’s army was now piling into them and, as he watched in horror, Sigvald’s army buckled and collapsed in the face of the onslaught.

“Pull back,” cried Víga-Barói, lurching to his feet and staggering back towards the curtains.

Sigvald did not look back as he stormed across the bridge with Oddrún hurrying after him. He seemed to have lost all interest in the battle and muttered curses under his breath as he pulled at his tangled hair.

“Énka,” roared Víga-Barói as he fought desperately to defend himself and stumbled back out onto the bridge. “The gates!”

The tiny hooded figure was still clutching onto the billowing material, but he had dropped to his knees and his head was lolling weakly on his shoulders.

“Let go!” snapped Víga-Barói as a red and brass wave rushed towards them. Énka gave no response and seemed to be in some kind of trance.

“Let go!” repeated Víga-Barói, booting Énka away from the curtains and sending him sprawling across the bridge.

Barely half of Sigvald’s army made it out of the courtyard before the gates reassumed their solid, brass reality. Several knights were trapped, their organs enveloped by the metal, and even more remained on the other side, moaning with pleasure as they were hacked apart by the victorious defenders.

“Prince, your men are being massacred,” cried Oddrún, struggling to keep up with the gold-clad figure.

Sigvald gave no reply but after a few minutes he stumbled to a halt, noticing an arc of delicate silverwork beneath the corpses. He dropped to his knees and began flinging bodies aside, still muttering to himself as he uncovered

one of the chariots he had used to assault the wall. “Wake up!” he howled, lifting a broken bird from the bodies and shaking it violently in both hands, surrounding himself in a cloud of white feathers. The eagle was clearly dead and he threw it back down in disgust. Then he grabbed another one and began shaking that, screaming in frustration as its head flopped about in his grip. “Fly, you wretched bird,” he howled, throwing it up in the air. It slammed back down a few feet away and the prince dropped to his knees with a groan of despair. He was covered in drying blood and as the feathers settled over him, they lodged in his matted hair and stuck to his tacky armour. “Look at me,” he spat, holding up his feathered arms to Oddrún. “I look ridiculous.”

Oddrún stooped down and grabbed Sigvald by the shoulders, dragging him up from the bodies. “You have to save them,” he said, turning the prince to face the knights clambering back across the bridge. “When Mord Huk learns of this he will head straight for the Gilded Palace. What’s to stop him now? You’ve broken all the old accords. He’s free to do as he pleases. You have to keep your army alive, Sigvald. How else can you prepare any kind of defence? You have to lead them home.”

Sigvald shoved Oddrún away with a sneer. “*Have* to?” He lifted his chin disdainfully and attempted to flatten his knotted, sticky mane of hair. “I think not, old friend. Sigvald the Magnificent doesn’t *have* to do anything.” He waved at the twitching limbs that surrounded them. “I’ve indulged these indolent brats for far too long. They’re too soft. Too pampered.” He leant closer to Oddrún and lowered his voice. “But I *will* have that brass skull, Oddrún, make no mistake about it.” He pointed north, beyond the glinting peaks of the mountains. “If no one else can help me, I’m sure our patron will.”

Oddrún struggled to control his disjointed limbs for a second, holding up his long arms to steady himself. Then he shook his head. “What are you saying? You’ve already given Belus Pül your soul. What else can you bargain with?”

Sigvald laughed bitterly. “Daemons are rarely lacking in imagination. I’m sure there will be something I can offer in return for such a small favour.” His cheeks flushed purple and he jabbed a finger at the fortress. “I will *not* be denied my prize. Not by a dog-brained oaf and a bunch of witless apes.”

Oddrún shook his head again. “Don’t do this,” he said, with mounting panic in his voice. “Think about what you’re suggesting.”

“Pah!” said Sigvald, nodding at Oddrún’s trembling, hunched body. “Look where thinking got you.”

Oddrún lowered his head.

The prince looked pained for a second, seeming to regret his words, then he

waved his hand dismissively and stormed off across the bridge. “I’ll be back in a day or two and then I’ll level this place to the ground.”

Oddrún stood in silence for a few minutes, rubbing his hands together and shaking his head, then he lurched after the receding figure of the prince, swinging his legs in great swooping strides.

As the two figures disappeared into the whirling banks of snow, still bickering, a column of survivors trailed after them, led by Víga-Barói, wearing his perpetual sneer as he waved his men on through the drifts. Every now and then he turned to look back at one of the knights and laugh at his haunted, anguished expression. “Keep up, baron,” he called, holding his sword aloft. “They’re headed north. Looks like the fun’s just beginning.”

* * *

Mord Huk sniffed the cool night breeze as it whipped across the crimson lake. “Fresh blood,” he grunted. His head resembled that of a grotesque, feral dog, complete with scarred snout, drooling, muscular jaws and a row of thick, yellow canines. He drew his steed to a halt. It was a lumbering mass of scarred muscle, iron and brass, welded together in vague imitation of a bull.

Mord Huk tilted back his head and wrinkled his bristly snout. “*Lots* of fresh blood.” He turned to the ranks of brass and iron behind him and waved his fist at a nearby rise.

Bursts of steam escaped from his mount’s mechanised joints as it stomped to the top of the hill. Once there, Mord Huk dropped down into the snow with a muffled *crunch* and peered out across the moonlit landscape. A low growl rumbled in his chest. Ahead of him was the fortress of Ör, surrounded by its broad, dark lake. Hundreds of lights were blinking along the fortress’ circular walls and, even at this distance, he could see mounds of bodies, piled across the slender bridge that led to his citadel. He had been attacked. A few broken banners were wedged in the corpses and he shook his head in disbelief as he saw the circular icon emblazoned across them. The greasy hair that covered his neck stood up in thick bristles and his hulking frame began to shake, rattling a helmet hung from his battered armour. The helmet was cast in brass and designed to resemble a leering skull. As it shook, it clanged ominously.

Mord Huk led his men down to the bridge, snorting and growling as he approached the piles of mangled limbs.

Some of the dog-helmed guards were picking their way through the mess, dragging behind them Sigvald’s surgeon, Hazül. The creature was unconscious,

its wiry body a mess of open wounds, and its shroud of lilac hair in tatters.

At the sight of their lord, the soldiers dropped their prisoner and fell to their knees.

Mord Huk reined in his mount and glared down at them, long trails of drool hanging from his black muzzle. He looked at Hazül in confusion for a moment, then gestured to a nearby banner. It was torn and scorched, but the device of Slaanesh was still clearly visible. “Who?” he grunted.

One of the guards clanged his fist against his cuirass. “Lord, it was the child with golden hair.”

Mord Huk shifted forward in his saddle, panting slightly. “Sigvald?”

The guard nodded.

Mord Huk leant back with a snort. “Sigvald,” he repeated, beginning to shake with laughter.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

An army of frozen Sigvalds punctuated the darkness, drenching the landscape with pale blue light. Each beaming prince was nearly twenty feet tall and built of slick, pulsing ice, and each of them was a caricature of the real prince, with exaggerated features and absurdly powerful muscles. As they lifted their arms in welcome, hundreds of weary figures shuffled through the snow towards them, throwing down their weapons and collapsing gratefully at their feet.

Baron Schüler's mind was numb as he stumbled towards the ice sculptures. Exhaustion and terror had left his thoughts as featureless as the snow. The prince had led them north for two days, deep into the frozen wastes, and the small reserves of strength Schüler had built up in the Gilded Palace were gone. If he had been asked his own name at that moment he would have struggled to recall it. As he reached one of the blazing effigies he let out a groan of pleasure. The ice prince's limbs were radiating unnatural warmth, melting the snow at its feet into a dark, bubbling pool. The baron dropped, pilgrim-like, to his knees, shedding ice from his ragged beard and his battered armour. He was vaguely aware that some of his deformed kinsmen were settling on the ground next to him, but he focussed all his attention on the glittering statue, afraid to acknowledge the grunting, slithering shapes that were pouring out of the night and waiting expectantly for his command. As he peered into the ice he caught a glimpse of his reflection. The make-up applied by Sigvald's servants had run down his cheeks, blurring his features and giving the odd impression that his face was melting. Schüler nodded his head. The transformation was apt. He could no longer recognise his own thoughts, so it seemed right that he could no

longer recognise his own face.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” asked Víga-Barói, waving at the ice sculptures as he emerged from the shadows. His scarred face was drenched in gore and his tight ponytail was slick with blood, but his sneer seemed almost playful. There was a spark of humour in his eyes as he dropped down next to the baron and waved over the heads of the assembled crowd. “It’s so like our prince to create such a picturesque source of warmth.” Several feet away, another frozen Sigvald was emerging from the snow, surrounded by goutts of steam and dwarfing the two figures at its feet. As the tiny, hooded sorcerer, Énka, summoned the thing into being, the real prince danced back and forth through the snow, gesticulating wildly and shouting instructions.

The baron looked blankly at Víga-Barói. He had not spoken to anyone for hours, and he was not sure if he could even remember how to. He turned away and finally allowed himself to look at some of the other figures moving towards the pale blue lights. He recognised the hunched, awkward shape of Oddrún, sitting alone, several feet away. “Who is he?” he asked, nodding towards the chancellor. His voice sounded hoarse and unfamiliar, but he continued. “What’s under that hood?”

Víga-Barói followed his gaze and shrugged. “Sigvald’s past.” He saw the baron’s confused expression and continued. “Oddrún is the prince’s last link with his old life.” He waved at the grotesque parade milling around them. “He thinks that as long as he keeps Oddrún alive, he could somehow escape all this and find his way back to a normal life.” He fixed his eyes on the baron. “But there’s no way back, Baron Schüler. For any of us.”

Schüler felt a chill that did not come from the snow. He looked back at his reflection and winced. His face was growing more stretched and distorted in the melting ice. He looked the same as the monsters that surrounded him.

“What brought you north?” asked Víga-Barói, clearly amused by the baron’s dismay. “Isn’t this what you wanted?” He gestured to Schüler’s beautifully sculpted breastplate and his keen, bloody sword. “You have power beyond anything your kinsmen could dream of.”

The baron shook his head, but could not deny the truth of Víga-Barói’s words. He looked down at the sword. “I had a family once,” he muttered. “*Normal* people. A wife. Children. People who put their faith in me. They thought I could protect them.” He shook his head and lowered his voice to a whisper. “But when the time came I could not. I could no more save them than I could hold back the sea. The Empire is spent.” He gripped his sword tighter as he tried to recall his original purpose. “All I could think to do was avenge them.

I came here looking for the strength to..." his voice trailed off and he frowned. He looked around at the throbbing blue lights and shook his head. "But what does it matter? It all seems so long ago."

Víga-Barói opened his mouth to reply, but his words died on his lips as he studied the baron's face. For a brief second, his sneer faltered and his glare softened. Then he shook his head and laughed. "We're all reborn in Sigvald's image now, my friend."

On the other side of the statue a pair of slender figures dropped into the snow and held their hands up to the warmth. The baron grimaced as he recognised them. They were the porcelain-skinned manikins he had seen at the feast. Their pale, ceramic faces were even more cracked than before, revealing large patches of glistening sinew.

"And is that our destiny?" he whispered, nodding towards them. "To become skinless freaks, dressed up as porcelain dolls?"

Víga-Barói laughed again. "Oh no, baron, that specific fate is reserved for an elect few." He looked over at the dolls' gaudy, painted smiles. "Those delightful girls are the former wives of Sigvald." He ran a finger over his scarred face. "The prince can't bear to watch those he loves grow old. Every new wrinkle breaks his heart. So at the first sign of a silver hair or a crow's foot, he removes their old skin and gives them a new one that will never crumple or sag."

Schüler gasped and placed a hand on his chest. "But what about Freydís?"

Víga-Barói saw the fear in Schüler's face and narrowed his eyes. "Ah, I see," he muttered.

Schüler blushed and looked away. "I simply wondered when her time would come."

"Hard to say," replied the knight, with a glint of amusement. "I believe she caused quite a stir when the prince decided to leave her behind, which won't have pleased him. But, that said, she has lasted longer than the others. Something about her defiance seems to intrigue him. Passion may blind him to any imperfections in her skin—for a while at least." He shrugged. "It makes little difference either way though."

Schüler shook his head in confusion.

"Sigvald has doomed her along with everything else in the Gilded Palace. Once Mord Huk learns of this attack his revenge will be swift, but as you can see," Víga-Barói waved to the ranks of soldiers filing out of the darkness, "since you arrived, Sigvald is no longer interested in defending his home, or his wife. Your counsel has stoked a fire in him. He's obsessed with seizing Mord Huk's fortress. Until he can find a way to achieve that he will think of nothing else. So,

we're heading north, into the realm of the gods."

Schüler squirmed beneath Víga-Barói's intense gaze. "I gave him no counsel—I only mentioned that the warriors of the Blood God were roaming through his lands. It was his decision to ride out and face them."

Víga-Barói shrugged, clearly unconvinced. "Whatever the reason, he's left the Gilded Palace at the mercy of his enemies. The princess' beauty will not protect her against the blood lust of Khorne. Sigvald has left her to die."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sväla could not survive for much longer. The cold was knifing into her head and her lungs were about to explode. She thrashed wildly, eel-like, under the water, kicking and biting in a desperate attempt to free herself, but it was no good, Halldórr's fingers were latched firmly around her throat and, as the seconds passed, the pain in her head was slowly replaced by an ominous numbness. She could see the shifting, blurry outline of his face, glaring down at her through the water. The Kurgan was cursing her as she died, but the words were muffled and distant, drowned out by the sound of her own pulse. Finally, Sväla's last breath exploded from her lungs, replaced by a flood of icy saltwater. Her pain began to fade as her life slipped away.

As Sväla's hands pressed desperately against Halldórr's chest, fingers of moonlight rippled through the water and glanced off her wedding rings. She watched the shards of light lancing away through the weeds and saw that Hauk was beside her in the water, stern and proud, as he came to welcome her into the afterlife. Then she noticed how young her husband looked. She was remembering him as he was in the earliest days of their courtship, back in the days when he taught her how to fight. "If your enemy is stronger, turn his strength against him," he said, gripping her slender frame. "If you're too small to overpower him, steer him in an unexpected direction." As Sväla nodded her understanding, Hauk graced her with a rare smile: willing her to succeed, willing her to live.

Sväla relaxed her arms, allowing the full weight of Halldórr to topple onto her. There was an explosion of sound as he crashed into the sea. As he flailed in

the water, trying to right himself, she slipped around him and jammed his face into the sharp rocks below.

Sväla burst from the sea, windmilling her arms, gasping for breath as she flopped back through the inky waves. As the sea pounded against her she felt a fierce lust for life. Nothing could stop her, she realised. Nothing could be *allowed* to stop her. It was her destiny to lead these people to salvation. She would see Hauk's dream through to the end.

A second later, Halldórr exploded into view, bellowing and shaking his head. His face was red with blood and there was a long tear in his face, stretching up from the corner of his mouth and giving him a lunatic, skeletal grin. He clamped his hand over the wound and howled, staggering back through the crashing surf.

As Sväla stumbled towards him, she had to fight the urge to vomit. She knew this was her last chance and threw herself at Halldórr with a guttural cry.

She landed a punch on his severed lips and his head rocked back on his shoulders, spraying more blood as he collapsed back into the brine.

Sväla stamped her foot down on the Kurgan's throat, pinning him beneath the waves. Then she turned towards the beach with a look of exultant defiance on her face. She pulled the ice and kelp from her head and raised her fist. "I'm Sväla the Witch!" she cried, forcing her foot down on the struggling chieftain and glaring at the figures on the beach. "Obey me! I am the wrath of the Wolf!"

She felt Halldórr punching and clawing at her leg, but she held firm. After a few minutes his movements grew weaker and finally ceased, but she kept her foot on his throat. "Do I have any other challengers?"

The Fallen looked back at her with a mixture of awe and terror. As she met their eyes, they looked shamefully at their feet, not daring to reply.

Sväla nodded. She had their allegiance again, but this would not be the last challenge, she was sure of that. She had brought them to a world of lunacy and death. It would take every ounce of her courage to drive them on through the madness. She would be tested again.

Sväla lifted her foot from Halldórr's throat and his corpse bobbed to the surface, grimacing up at her through the surf. She looked past him into the pewter depths, searching for a glimpse of another figure. There was a flicker of movement and she rushed towards it, reaching into the brine for her husband's hand; but it was just a fish, glinting and flashing as it slipped out to sea.

The Fallen spread out across the frozen wastes in a silent black line. Thousands of them: warriors, herdsman, crones and cripples, all staring at the moonlit coast

in terror. Up ahead of them, a single, dark figure was the only interruption in the endless white. As Sväla looked across glittering drifts to the distant line of mountains, her heart raced. Nothing like this had ever been done. She had brought a nation to the roof of the world. Despite their fear and mistrust, she had led an entire people right to the very source of their curse. Soon, they would either have Sigvald's head on a pole, or they would be no more. Either way, the nightmare would end.

Valdür the Old strode out towards her. "Do you see anything?" he asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She bridled at the pity in his eyes. "Nothing," she said, sniffing hard and raising her chin.

"Well, I'm sure the visions will return. Maybe we're still too close to that wretched island?"

Sväla shrugged. "We must do without visions." She waved her knife at the magnificent peaks and the gleaming vastness of the snow. "This place is not as empty as it looks. We won't be alone for long. And whatever horrors are waiting out there must be harnessed to our will. Sigvald's depravity will be like a beacon to them. It shouldn't be hard to find someone, or *something*, that can lead us to him."

"It's not just the monsters you'll need to harness to your will." Valdür looked back at the huge crowds gathered along the coast. "There are others who would see you fail."

Sväla nodded. "I'll deal with Ungaur the Blessed, don't worry about that, old friend."

Valdür shook his head. "He's not the one I meant."

Sväla frowned and followed his gaze. She saw the wiry figure of her son, deep in conversation with the hulking priest. "Svärd?" For a second, her resolve faltered, then she clenched her jaw and shook her head. "Nothing will stop this crusade. I will see to that." She pulled back her shoulders and gripped her iron knife a little tighter. "Make no mistake, Valdür, I *will* find Sigvald."

After four days of marching, they began to die. At first there seemed nothing strange in it. Hunting was hard, many of the Fallen were old and frail and the bitter winds lashed through even the thickest furs. The weakest of them simply crumpled into the deep snow. Soon, however, it became clear that something else was at play. Strange voices drifted on the wind and the Norscans began to eye their own kin with suspicion, unsure who was pouring such scorn and derision on them. Their paranoia grew as they realised the sun was never going to rise.

The heavy darkness that shrouded the landscape was no natural night. Not a single star peered down at them and many began to wonder how even a witch could navigate in such a void. As their fears grew, tempers flared and knives flashed. Some of the bodies left behind were not so old, and some were slick with blood.

The landscape grew harsher as they marched north. The frozen plains gave way to jagged rocks and foothills and, as they edged closer to the mountains, they found themselves clambering up icy, brutal slopes.

A few of the younger warriors raced ahead, eager to prove themselves to their new queen and still naive enough to consider the crusade a great adventure. After several hours of absence, one such scout waved back at them from the edge of a distant peak. “Queen Sväla,” he called, shielding his voice from the howling wind and holding his javelin aloft.

She clambered up a small rise and peered out from her fur-lined hood, trying to make him out more clearly.

“There’s a star ahead,” he called, his voice full of pride.

“A star?” said Sväla, turning to Valdür who was climbing up towards her. Her eyes glinted with excitement. Despite her facade of confidence, she had been utterly lost ever since they left the longships. With a star to guide them, she could at least be sure they were not marching in circles.

The old warrior grinned back at her, but was too exhausted to reply.

Sväla raised her knife in salute to the young scout and waved her people in his direction.

As she climbed towards the scout, Sväla tried to blank out the whining calls that echoed through the banks of snow. Dozens of voices taunted her in a language she had never heard before, but the malice needed no translation. As she hauled herself up the rocks, Sväla began to notice something else strange. As she dislodged stones with her grasping fingers, some of the smaller ones tumbled up the slope rather than down it. As she climbed further, even the larger stones began to roll uphill rather than down. She looked back at the others and saw that they had noticed it too. She realised that as her muscles trembled with the effort of clinging to the rocks, she was no longer preventing herself from falling back down the slope; she actually had to stop herself falling *up* it.

She turned to Valdür with a puzzled expression, intending to ask him about the strange phenomenon, but instead she said: “You’re holding me back, Valdür. Maybe you shouldn’t have come? You’re just too old for this kind of journey.”

Valdür’s eyes bulged with shock and hurt.

Sväla gasped, horrified by her own words. She shook her head and reached

towards him. "You left my husband to die," she gasped. "Will you do the same to me?"

Valdür's face twisted into a snarl and he backed away.

Sväla clamped a hand over her mouth and shook her head fiercely.

Valdür's expression softened as he saw the confusion on her face. "What more can I expect from a woman?" he asked. He frowned. "Even your own son is not safe from your lies. You've stolen his rightful throne. And now you're leading us all to our deaths." He mimicked Sväla and clamped a hand over his mouth, but after a few seconds of staring at each other in mute horror, he tried to speak again. "Next time you sleep I'll slit your lying throat."

Sväla eyes widened, but she would not remove her hand from her mouth. She looked down the slope and saw arguments breaking out amongst all those nearest to the summit. As insults and curses echoed through the snow, she realised that the whole army was on the verge of turning on itself. She grabbed a horn from Valdür's belt and let out a shrill blast. The Norscans looked out at her with rage in their eyes as she pointed to the hand pressed over her mouth. A few more cruel jibes followed until, one by one, they grasped her meaning and clamped their mouths shut.

Valdür patted Sväla's shoulder and pointed to a narrow crevasse between two of the jagged peaks.

She nodded in reply and they led the others down between the rocks. The wind was howling down the gulley with such force that tears streamed from their eyes as they waited for the others to file down after them. Sväla crouched next to a rock and spent a few minutes scratching at it with her iron knife. Then she waved Valdür over and pointed out the runes she had left. "Do not speak," they said. "Our words are being twisted by the mountain spirits. Tell the others to read this."

He nodded and signalled to those nearby that they should look at the stone. Then he followed Sväla as she scrambled off in the direction of the scout.

The young tribesman was waiting on a ledge for them as they emerged from the gulley. Sväla noted that his face was daubed in crimson war paint and realised that he must have belonged to the tribe that killed Hauk. She felt no anger towards him though; they were all one tribe now.

"There," he said, pointing his javelin at the horizon.

Sväla raised her hand to silence him, then, realising his words held no malice, she lowered it again. She spoke hesitantly, unsure what would emerge from her mouth. "I see it," she said. "We've left the spirits behind," she said, waving Valdür up onto the ledge. Then she looked back out over the incredible

spectacle of the Wastes. Mountains filled the horizon, rearing up from the frigid ground like spined monsters and dwarfing even the tortured clouds that writhed between their jagged peaks. The moons were obscured by banks of rolling thunderheads, but there was a single light twinkling in the heavens: a flash of gold amongst the black and grey that seemed to have strayed north from more cheery skies.

Sväla narrowed her eyes and peered through the storm. “There’s something familiar about this,” she muttered.

Valdür threw back his fur-lined hood and smoothed his grey hair back from his face. “Did you see this in your visions?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe.” She turned away and smiled at the young scout. “You’ve done well. I think that star is important somehow.” She turned to see that some of the elders were struggling towards the ledge with their hands clamped over their mouths and their bodies shrouded in tattered, snow-covered furs. At their head, she saw the bearded face of Ungaur the Blessed, grinning at her from beneath his snarling wolf hood, using his staff to heave his muscle-clad bulk up to her side.

“Where now, witch?” he grunted waving his staff at the storm. “Where does Völtar wish us to die next?”

Sväla did not acknowledge the venom in the shaman’s voice. She simply waved her knife at the long column of figures struggling up the mountain behind him. “Tell the others to head for the star,” she answered. She stared at Ungaur and Valdür until both of them nodded to show that they understood. Then she turned and began climbing down into the storm-lashed valley. “We’re nearing the end,” she said, fixing her eyes on the lonely star. “If anyone becomes separated, leave them behind. Völtar the Wolf will watch over them.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

On the third day of marching they reached a broad plain, nestling between the blasted peaks. As they climbed down a narrow mountain path, Sigvald pointed out a patch of green directly below them. It looked like a calm lake, a tranquil haven in the heart of the brutal landscape, with a violet gemstone in its centre. Sigvald wiped his sodden hair from his face and looked up at Oddrún with a grin. “We’re here,” he yelled, straining to make himself heard over the noise of the storm.

Oddrún nodded but gave no reply, pulling his filthy robes a little tighter around his lanky frame. As he followed the prince, he muttered bitterly under his breath and tried to avoid looking at their destination.

A few yards behind them trudged Víga-Barói, closely followed by the baron. Upon seeing the lake they both stumbled to a halt, baffled by the strange sight; then, noticing that the prince and the giant were already disappearing from view, hurried after them, along with the garish remnants of Sigvald’s army.

As the soldiers staggered clear of the treacherous foothills, they saw the smooth expanse more clearly. It was actually a broad, circular lawn of perfectly maintained grass, and the gemstone at its centre was a cluster of tall, violet pavilions shining in the moonlight. A wide, venerable old hedge surrounded the lawn, bejewelled with rambling roses and sculpted to resemble an undulating serpent. Undaunted by the strangeness of the place, the Geld-Prince strode calmly through a gate of knotted oak and stepped out onto the lawn.

Groans of pleasure exploded from the weary troops as they followed him

into the garden. As soon as they passed through the gate, the terrible screaming of the storm was silenced and the weather changed from bitter winter to a balmy summer's evening. The soldiers collapsed gratefully in a jumble of chitinous limbs and aching, shivering wings.

Sigvald carried on towards the pavilions with Oddrún lurching and weaving after him. As they passed the smaller, outlying structures, the prince saw figures gathered inside them. Shifting firelight distorted their silhouettes, but it was clear that their hands were pressed against the walls of the tents, as if they were monitoring his approach through their outstretched fingers. He did not pause, however, marching straight ahead towards the largest of the tents. Once there, he wrenched open a pair of canvas doors and stepped inside.

He found himself surrounded by music and leaves. The pavilion contained an orchard and the branches of the trees were crowded with hundreds of songbirds, all trilling and warbling as he stepped beneath the fruit-laden boughs. He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief at finding such a bucolic scene buried deep in the heart of the Shadowlands.

At the centre of this pretty bower was a wooden bench, dangling from the branches of a twisted old juniper tree. Swinging gently back and forth on it was a daemon.

Sigvald bowed low as Belus Pül beckoned him closer. His patron had not aged a day since their last meeting, despite the passage of two centuries. It still resembled a slim, androgynous youth and was even wearing the same clothes—a plain, white habit. Its face was such a picture of benign serenity that Sigvald could not help but smile. A pair of small black horns curved up from the daemon's smooth, hairless head and in its left hand, it carried a single white lily. As it watched his approach, the daemon held the flower up to its face and sniffed, closing its eyes and crushing its small, pretty nose into the petals.

"Sigvald the Magnificent, Prince of the Decadent Host," said the daemon, in a soft, melodic voice, turning to another figure sat a few feet away, "arrived as casually as if he were a daily visitor. His manner was nonchalant and self-assured, despite having neglected his celestial parent for almost two hundred years."

Sigvald shook his head in dismay and followed the daemon's gaze to the other side of the lawn.

At first he thought his patron was talking to a huge, pale spider. The light blazing through the lilac walls made it hard to make out anything clearly, but he could see that the thing had dozens of fine, segmented appendages that trailed out from a small plump body. It was only as he stepped nearer that Sigvald

realised it was a naked, hairless man with a nest of twitching arms sprouting from his sides. Each of his needle-thin limbs ended in a sharpened, inked point and as the daemon spoke, the man wrote on a long roll of parchment. His face was devoid of features apart from a single hole at its centre, which curled inwards like the auricle of a huge ear.

“Wait,” gasped Sigvald, rushing towards the angelic youth. “I’ve *never* forgotten what you did for me. You’re in my thoughts constantly, Belus, but your gifts have been such a blessing, that time itself—”

“The prince fawned pathetically, like an errant child,” interrupted the daemon, still directing its words to the scribe, “vomiting treacly platitudes in an attempt to assuage Belus Pül’s grief.” As the daemon spoke, the scratching of its scribe’s quill-like fingers continued. With so many limbs scuttling back and forth, he was able to write with incredible speed—quickly filling the roll of parchment with tightly packed rows of tiny, florid text.

“Stop it,” snapped Sigvald, glaring at the faceless man. “These aren’t platitudes, I’m simply...” his words trailed off as he realised that as soon as he spoke, the scribe ceased scribbling and kept his forest of limbs hovering over the paper, waiting for the daemon to continue.

“Without showing an ounce of contrition, Sigvald insulted Belus Pül’s only remaining friend and refused to even acknowledge his own neglect.” As the daemon spoke, the scribe began transcribing its words again. It was clear from the reams of text he was producing that the strange creature must be elaborating wildly on the daemon’s words.

Sigvald’s eyes bulged with rage and he opened his mouth to hurl an insult at the pair of them.

“My lord,” grunted Oddrún, stepping into the orchard and placing a hand on Sigvald’s shoulder. “We should leave while we can. This is pointless.”

“A grotesque, jangling sack of limbs dragged itself before the regal gaze of the deity,” continued the daemon. “To Belus Pül’s horror, it realised that the wretched thing was Sigvald’s perverse childhood companion—the one who had been so vile and insulting many years earlier.” The daemon’s face remained emotionless as it continued its gentle stream of vitriol. “The benevolent deity was shocked to think that Sigvald would so compound his negligence by continuing to consort with such an ugly dullard.”

Sigvald took a deep breath to calm himself and stepped closer to the daemon. As he neared the swing, he dropped to one knee and lowered his head. “Belus, you are my eternal guardian, my one true love. If there’s anything I can do to ease the pain I’ve caused you, I beg you to tell me.”

The daemon finally showed a sign of emotion. Its eyes glittered with tears as it held out a hand for Sigvald to kiss. As it moved its arm, a disparate collection of items jangled over its skin: bangles, chains and rings of various styles and sizes, none of which seemed in keeping with the being's simple attire.

As the prince obeyed the command and pressed his lips to the daemon's pale flesh, he felt his skin blistering and quickly withdrew. The heat pouring through the daemon's pores was no surprise to him—he knew all too well the incredible power contained within its unassuming figure. This close up, it was hard for him to even look at Belus—even after a lifetime of witnessing atrocities, his eyes were unwilling to focus on such an abomination. The daemon's attempts to appear angelic and serene only succeeded in drawing attention to its essential wrongness. It did not quite belong in the real world—almost like a figure torn from one painting and plastered over the top of another. Everything about it was too bright, too saturated or too sharply focussed.

A faint smile pursed the daemon's lips and it took another long sniff of the lily. "As the proud young prince realised the terrible extent of his guardian's hurt, he finally began to feel some remorse and, seeing this, the kindly deity relented. So great was Belus Pül's love for all its children that it could no longer gird its heart against Sigvald's pitiful entreaties. Belus Pül had long ago given its heart to Sigvald, and could not bear to stay angry with him for long."

Sigvald's jaw clenched as he heard the scribe begin to scratch at the parchment again.

The daemon withdrew its hand and patted the swing, indicating that Sigvald should sit on the knotted oak.

As the prince sat down, the daemon kept its gaze in the middle distance, as though blind to his presence. After a few seconds of silence it waved its flower at Oddrún. "Finally seeing the callous nature of his actions, Sigvald banished the grotesque monster from the deity's presence."

Sigvald sighed and looked over at his chancellor, but before he had chance to speak, the giant shuffled back towards the pavilion's entrance, clearly glad to escape.

Once Oddrún was gone, the daemon began rocking the swing gently back and forth and took Sigvald's hand. "Despite the passage of the years, the benevolent deity still felt a close bond with the prince and sensed that even with all his assumed majesty and pomp he might not be above amusing his patron with a few simple distractions." The daemon fluttered its long eyelashes and briefly met Sigvald's eye. "After all, Belus' kindness had been so great, all those years earlier, that it did not seem unreasonable to expect a little more

entertainment.”

Sigvald loosed the daemon’s hand and stopped the swing. “Maybe we could come to a *new* agreement?” he said. “I’ve done everything you wished, Belus. I’ve indulged every whim in your name. No pleasure, however slight, has been beneath my notice, and all of it has been for you.”

The daemon rose slowly from the swing and walked over towards the scribe. There was a barely discernable note of amusement in its voice as it answered. “Incredibly, the young prince seemed to expect some new favour despite the fact that Belus Pül had heard nothing of his exploits for two centuries. But even as he spoke the words, Sigvald’s dreadful arrogance faltered. The ungrateful child realised that in return for any new gift, it would only be right that he offer something new. As he pondered this, and all his other treacheries, it occurred to Sigvald that maybe he should offer to complete three simple trials—nothing too strenuous for a man of his stature, but enough to amuse his dear, lonely old friend.”

Sigvald glared at one of the items glinting on the daemon’s right arm. It was a bronze torque—crudely made and far too ugly to be worn by such a regal being—but at that moment he would have given anything for it. “So,” he hissed, clenching his teeth, “even a man’s soul isn’t enough for one such as you.” He felt his rage boil up through his chest and let it out in a furious yell. He leapt from the swing and drew his sword, swinging it wildly at the daemon’s arm.

The blade passed through the daemon as easily as smoke. Belus Pül’s body undulated briefly, like a reflection in water, but the daemon did not acknowledge the attack, even as Sigvald slammed heavily to the ground and howled in frustration.

The enraged prince leapt back to his feet and tried another lunge. Again, the blade passed straight through the daemon without making contact and, again, Sigvald crashed to the ground. He lay still for a few seconds breathing heavily, then spoke in taut, clipped tones. “You’re playing me for a fool,” he said, without looking up from the grass, “but so be it. If I indulge you in this, will you guarantee me success? Will you give me the strength to defeat my enemy, Mord Huk? Will you promise me his corpse, and his possessions?”

The daemon’s blank face creased into a broad smile. It turned its doe-like eyes on Sigvald. “Belus was touched by the prince’s kind offer. The deity was even more delighted when the prince explained the nature of his first errand. The humbled prince reminded the divine being of an ancient fable, concerning a great, two-headed drake of elven legend. Sigvald reminded Belus Pül that this fascinating creature was called Galrauch and that it had long ago fled from an

elven realm—devoting its life to the service of the Great Architect, Tzeentch. Belus Pül was delighted to hear that the creature dwelled in a mountain lair not far away, and that Sigvald intended to seek out the beast and return with one of its talons—something the deity had long sought.”

Sigvald frowned. “Galrauch? I’ve never heard of such a thing.” Then he shrugged. “Still, what harm can a dragon do me? However many heads it has?” He climbed to his feet and dusted a few blades of grass from his gold armour. “Very well, Belus,” he said, eyeing the daemon with suspicion. “Tell me the way.”

The daemon continued to grace Sigvald with its terrifying, benevolent smile for a few seconds longer, then it strolled over to the scribe, peering at the paper as the creature held it up for inspection. Eventually, the daemon nodded, apparently satisfied, and continued dictating. “So it was that as he watched the pale light filtering down through the juniper blossom and glinting in Belus Pül’s kind, tearful eyes, Sigvald felt all the shame and unworthiness of his position. He knew that even in the pursuit of pleasure, it is not enough to be a dilettante, so he resolved to complete the three trials with as much alacrity and dignity as possible. After all, what gift could be too generous for the blessed being that had ensured him an eternity of pleasure?”



CHAPTER TWENTY

Sigvald felt as though his soul might burst with happiness. As he hauled himself up onto the highest peak of the mountain his eyes were streaming with tears and his heart was pounding in his chest. “By the gods!” he howled, shielding his face from the fierce, ice-laden wind and squinting down into the valley. “Where have we come? Where *have* we come?”

A scene of incredible, awful beauty was spread out before him. The whole, frozen landscape was boiling and rolling, as though dragged aloft by the fury of the storm. Great, knotted limbs of rock reached up into the sky in an orgy of heaving granite, while overhead the moons flickered from emerald to cerise, lighting up the snow and glinting along the carcasses of vast, silver-scaled leviathans, swimming lazily through the clouds, each of them bristling with tattered, lateen sails and garish turquoise fins. He realised that they were enormous airborne ships, carved from the hollowed remains of monstrous sea creatures. Other things swam in their wake: bloated fish, with dangling, insectoid limbs and cawing, avian voices swam ahead of pink, featherless birds, with ruby coloured gowns and pale, human faces. The whole surreal carnival was circling a mountain even higher than those surrounding it. This tallest peak was made of a different rock than the others. As the twin moons flickered overhead, pinks and blues were refracted in its crags and facets, rippling across slopes that seemed to be carved from a single, colossal diamond.

Sigvald laughed through his tears. “Look at that,” he cried, shaking his head. As he looked around in amazement, he spotted a crowd of disembodied shadows, flitting in and out of the storm. They were tall and willowy and

whirling around each other in a frenetic, giggling dance; blowing long trumpets that filled peaks and valleys with a piercing, tuneless din. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Oddrún was standing a few feet below him, clutching grimly to the shattered remains of a tree. The daemon had ordered Sigvald to leave his army behind, but had insisted he take Oddrún, so the lumbering chancellor had been forced to trail miserably after the prince for the last three days. Oddrún shook his huge cowed head, too exhausted from the climb to reply. Then he backed away from the tree with a grunt of disgust. Hundreds of tiny black shapes were scuttling across the white bark and onto his arms. To his horror, he saw that they were miniscule, whispering men, with glinting, chitinous limbs. As he staggered away, he dusted some of them from his sackcloth robes, cursing under his breath and lurching back and forth across the icy rocks in an effort to escape them.

The prince laughed even harder when saw Oddrún’s panicked dance. “Finally, you’re entering into the spirit of things,” he cried, his voice edged with hysteria.

Oddrún continued whirling around for a few moments, waving his clumsy limbs and flicking the spider people from his clothes. Then he collapsed into the snow with a groan, clutching his head in his hands.

“Ask the doctor where we are,” Sigvald demanded, once he had managed to stifle his laughter.

Oddrún pulled the gold casket from his robes and slid back the lid.

Doctor Schliemann’s head was already beginning to rot. His gaunt features had taken on a grey-green hue and networks of black veins had spread over his face. His wire-rimmed spectacles had slid down his long, hooked nose and as he turned his eyes on the prince, they were clouded and blind.

“Where are we, old friend?” cried Sigvald, dropping from the ledge, grabbing the casket and holding it up in front of his face. He grimaced at the smell of putrefaction but kept the head close as he waited for an answer.

The doctor’s reply sounded flat and inhuman. “The edge of reason. The edge of the Shadowlands. The shifting borders of the mortal realm.” He paused to cough up a thick clot of dried blood. “As we approach the immaterial kingdoms, logic will begin to fragment. It may become hard to conceive rational thoughts, or even to maintain physical form.” He ran a bloated, black tongue over his lips. “Continue much further and the tides of magic will tear you apart.”

Sigvald rolled his eyes and let out a dismissive “Pah!”, then he loosed the casket. It bounced away over the rocks, shedding screws and springs before spinning off into a deep drift. Sigvald turned away with a look of rapt awe on his

face. "This is the edge of *everything*, Oddrún," he whispered, looking out at the tortured mountains and the screaming, daemon-filled heavens. "Where life itself begins anew." He shook his head. "How can I have been so idle, with such wonders still to be seen?"

Oddrún scrambled across the slope and plucked the casket from the snow. The lid had slammed shut when it hit the rocks, so he shoved it back and peered in at the doctor's head. There was a fresh rent in his cold skin, revealing a flash of white skull, but no blood was flowing from the wound. He studied the doctor's scarred, tortured features for a few seconds then let out a roar of anguish. "You can't treat him like this!" he cried, grabbing Sigvald's shoulder and shoving him back.

The prince stumbled and teetered on the edge of the precipice. His eyes widened with excitement as he leant out into the void, with only Oddrún's long, trembling arm between him and death. He let out another burst of rippling laughter that spiralled up into the whirling snow. "Are you going to kill me now, Oddrún?" he cried, making no effort to steady himself. "Will you murder me, after all?"

Oddrún held Sigvald there for a few seconds, trembling with rage. Then he mumbled something into the folds of his hood and heaved him back to safety.

"Hand me that," snapped Sigvald, giving his chancellor a mocking sneer as he took the battered casket. "Now. Where exactly are we, Doctor Schliemann? You told me you could lead us to the home of the Great Drake."

"I have. These are Galrauch's hunting grounds. The particular strangeness of the landscape is due to the distorting influence of its master, the sorcerer, Tzeentch."

Sigvald nodded. "So where do we find it? Where is our prize?"

"The Great Drake is tormented by its past. It was once a creature of great intellect, but that intellect has become utterly warped by Chaos. When it's not feasting on its victims, it hides its shame beneath a crystal mountain, surrounding itself with fractured reflections and torturing itself with paranoid delusions and half-remembered oaths."

"A crystal mountain? Of course." Sigvald looked back over the valley at the glinting peak on the far side. "So that's its home." He took one last look at the monstrous beasts drifting overhead, then began to clamber down the far side of the mountain. "Keep up, Oddrún," he cried, giving the giant a playful smile as he scrambled down the slope. "Who knows when you might have another chance to rid yourself of me?"

The crystal mountain was even more treacherous than the previous summits. The moonlight lanced down through its jagged facets, making it almost impossible to know where to tread. Each icy step looked as if it might be a bottomless pit lined with unforgiving points and disorientating reflections. Before he had climbed halfway, Sigvald collapsed in defeat—clattering down onto the rocks with a bark of frustration. “Must we climb the whole thing?” He stared back down through the billowing drapes of snow, but could see no sign of Oddrún. In desperation, he drew his sword and lashed wildly at the crystal. His blade glanced off it without leaving as much as a scratch. “How do we get in?” he yelled into the storm, knowing there was no one to answer. He looked at the creatures circling above.

His awed appreciation of their appearance was already fading, being quickly replaced by irritation at the delay. Somewhere south of him, a dog-headed moron was riding to war wearing the brass skull that should rightfully be his. “What a waste,” he muttered, considering the tragedy of such godlike power being funnelled through the mind of a simpleton.

As he lay back against the ice, lamenting the unfairness of his fate, Sigvald noticed that the snow had turned to hail. Large, gleaming pellets of the stuff were drumming against the mountainside and pinging off his golden armour. There was something strange about the downpour and he held out a hand to catch a piece. As he held the hail to his face, Sigvald realised it was not made of ice; it was a thick, anaemic maggot as large as his thumb. As it wriggled in his grip, he saw a dark shape suspended inside its fleshy rolls. He gave the maggot a gentle squeeze and it popped, allowing a winged, black eel to slide between his fingers and flutter off into the storm. The prince shook his head in disgust and looked up at the roiling clouds. As he did so, dozens of the maggots landed in his hair and on his face. Several of them burst as they hit him, spawning more of the black eels. “This is ridiculous, I can’t even—” he began, before gagging as one of the creatures landed in his mouth and burst over his tongue. He leapt to his feet and heaved himself up onto a higher piece of crystal, coughing and spitting. “Oddrún,” he howled, desperately batting away more of the grubs, “what does the doctor say?”

There was no reply and Sigvald’s face began to twitch as his frustration grew. “What am I doing here?” he screamed, pounding his forehead with his fists. He stumbled backwards, landed badly and slid across the icy slope, hurtling down a narrow crevasse. His armour scraped and banged over the faceted crystals and when he came to a halt, several feet down the slope, he lay still, shivering with rage and pain. After a few moments he looked up and

frowned in confusion. A few feet away, on the other side of a small rise, a pale, slack-jawed face watched him. He climbed to his feet, wincing at the dozens of fresh bruises that were throbbing beneath his armour. "Hello?" he called, raising his hand to shield his head from the maggots which were still tumbling off the rocks. As he approached the face, it was hard to be sure exactly what he was seeing. Everywhere he looked, he saw reflections of pale jowly skin, wide, vacant eyes and drooling, toothless gums.

It was not until he was just a few feet away that Sigvald realised the grotesque scale of the face. The thing was over thirty feet tall and its gaping mouth led down into a vast, inky void. Sigvald grinned, noticing that it was exhaling huge, foetid blasts of subterranean air. "This must be it," he gasped, approaching the yawning jaws. As he neared the face, he realised that the huge eyes were looking down at him in abject terror. Sigvald stepped closer and then cursed. The maggots were still pouring down from the storm clouds and one of them had lodged in his hair. He brushed it away and lifted his circular shield over his head. "I'm seeking a Great Drake," he cried, looking up into the monstrous, rolling eyes. "Can you show me the way?"

A low moan was the face's only reply.

Sigvald squinted through the hail, trying to see to the back of the huge mouth. He couldn't be sure, but it looked as though there was some kind of cavern or tunnel back there. He looked nervously over his shoulder. "Oddrún," he cried. "Are you there?"

The only sounds came from the daemoniac creatures screeching overhead and Sigvald knew he was alone. He looked back at the cavernous mouth and grimaced. Finally, the constant rattle of the maggots drumming against his shield decided the matter. He strode purposefully towards the mouth, climbed over the moist, toothless gums and stepped down onto its vast, flaccid tongue. As his feet sank into the soft muscle, he paused, looking around to see what would happen. The moaning sound grew a little louder, but other than that, nothing changed. Sigvald shrugged and took another few steps. The moonlight did not reach very far inside the mouth, but he felt even more certain he could see some kind of cavern at the back of the tongue. "This *must* be it," he said, striding forwards.

Oddrún cursed as he heaved the gold casket over a ledge and hauled himself up after it. The vile creatures were still pounding against his hood, but he paid them no attention as he climbed to his feet and scoured the glittering mountainside for any sign of the prince. Something strange caught his eye and he reeled off down a narrow crevasse. At the far end of the gulley he emerged into a small opening

and shook his head in disbelief. A vast, thirty-foot tall face was leering down at him from the rock. Its mouth was clamped tightly shut and its enormous eyes were shining with mirth. The chancellor backed away in horror, even more desperate to find Sigvald. Then he clambered off over the crystals, looking for a way into the mountain.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After a few days, Brother Bürmann started to realise something had changed. The surgery lights still glared down on him, picking out the rows of knives and the lurid vats of acid, but the chambers had grown oddly quiet. Far at the back of his tortured, broken mind, a glimmer of hope flickered into life. “The screaming,” he thought, lifting his head from his chest and staring into the darkness. “It’s stopped.”

The other slaves gazed through him, unseeing, as he shook their shoulders and tried to rouse them. He understood. What right did he have to drag them from such merciful oblivion? What right did he have to consider escape? And anyway, after the things they had done and seen, what would be the point in leaving? There was no way back for any of them, no chance of a normal life. Even if he could somehow find his way out, how could he ever face his congregation, carrying memories of such dreadful crimes? He ran a finger up the scar on his neck. How could he preach, without a voice? He tried to settle down and wait for the return of the lilac-haired surgeon, but it was useless: his mind kept teasing him with visions of freedom until finally he pulled himself to his feet with a wordless groan and, wincing at the pain in his cramped muscles, he stepped out into the operating theatre.

The crimson-stained slabs were empty. The grotesque bodies of Hazül’s patients had all vanished. The only reminders of their presence were the bloodstained knives and a single iridescent wing, shimmering and fluttering on the floor. Brother Bürmann ran a hand over his shaved head and frowned. For as long as he could remember, these chambers had been filled with screams and

pleas for mercy, but now there was only the sound of his own laboured breathing.

Or was there?

The monk held his breath for a moment to listen. Somewhere outside, he could hear the sound of breaking glass and cracking wood. His heart raced. The Gilded Palace was a labyrinth. Those who were foolish enough to enter would never find their way out again if the Geld-Prince did not wish it. But maybe the vandal he could hear might be able to lead him to freedom?

He hurried past the empty slabs and stumbled into the passageway outside. It was equally deserted. Several portraits of Sigvald had been torn from their dusty perches, and the prince's face grinned up at Bürmann as he lurched past, heading towards the door that led onto the balconies outside. As he reached the door, the priest looked anxiously up and down the corridor, expecting to be discovered at any moment.

A memory of Hazül's wailing voice drifted out of the darkness. "You must grow to love the screams. Think of it as a wonderful opera, with yourself as the conductor, teasing the music from your cast." Bürmann shuddered. He had to escape. Whatever horrors waited outside, they could never match Víga-Barói's surgeon. He shoved the doors open and crept out into the night.

The Gilded Palace was spread before him—its golden spires and cupolas blazing through the snowflakes. He leant on the balcony and looked down through the endless storm, beyond the dangling foundations to the distant rocks below. The landscape was empty. Not a single sentry was patrolling the grounds of the estate. He looked up at the walls of the palace. Every window was dark. Was he really alone? No, there it was again—the sound of glass smashing and maybe even a voice, howling curses.

He stepped back inside and hurried down the hallway, rushing through a series of doors towards the sound. As he went, he abandoned all sense of caution and broke into a run. He knew it couldn't be long before he was discovered. He would never have this chance again. He began to realise it was a woman's voice he could hear and it was cursing Sigvald's name. He picked up his pace. It must be another slave. Maybe together they could find a way out?

Brother Bürmann entered the cool gloom of a chapel and stumbled to a halt. The room was lined with delicate frescoes depicting Sigvald's countless victories. Bürmann gasped at the grandiose beauty of the images. He had never been admitted to Sigvald's private chambers before and even in the pale moonlight the effect was stunning. There was a row of circular windows along one side of the chapel filled with leaded, coloured glass that splashed a

kaleidoscope of colours across the frescoes. The heroic scenes were animated by the gaudy lights, pulsing with life and passion, and even knowing all that he knew, Bürmann could not help but admire them. The frescoes reached all the way up to the distant vaulted dome of the ceiling, where they framed a row of golden bosses, each designed to resemble the laughing face of the Geld-Prince.

Bürmann flinched as he noticed a towering, marble statue gazing down at him from the far end of the aisle. The gleaming stone was carved in the likeness of a dreadful Chaos daemon: an androgynous youth, wearing a simple habit and a serene smile that seemed in direct contrast with a pair of dark horns. The daemon was holding a long-stemmed lily in one of its hands; its other hand was extended towards the pews in silent benediction.

The priest found himself drawn irresistibly towards the beautiful figure and stumbled down the aisle, mouthing silent prayers as he went. As he dropped to his knees at the statue's feet, he noticed that the flagstones were covered with hundreds of fragments of canvas. Each piece was a fraction of a painting, showing a detail of Sigvald's face: blue eyes, aquiline noses and golden locks were scattered around the room, as though the Geld-Prince had been torn apart by his daemoniac patron.

The sound of breaking wood snapped Bürmann from his reverie and he turned away from the statue with relief, scouring the shadows for the source of the noise. He saw a movement in one of the pews and crept forwards, terrified that he might see the scarred features of Víga-Barói glaring at him from the darkness. To his relief, he saw a young woman instead, crouching on the floor between the pews and tearing a painting into long strips. She had her back to him, but something about her seemed familiar. As Bürmann edged closer, he heard a stream of muttered curses coming from her mouth. She was using the sinuous, revolting language of the Chaos Wastes, but the source of her anger was clear. She was spitting and hissing as she tore Sigvald's face into a thousand pieces.

Bürmann paused, unsure whether to reveal his presence. Then, as he watched the woman struggling with the canvas, he felt a sudden rush of lust. He shook his head in disbelief, appalled at himself. Despite the awful danger he was in, despite the brutal visions locked in his mind, he found himself staring at the tight-fitting damask of the woman's jade dress, leering at her like a teenager. As the woman wrenched the painting apart, the dress shifted enticingly over her curves, causing the priest to emit a wordless moan of dismay.

The woman leapt to her feet and turned to face him.

It took a few seconds for the priest to drag his gaze up from her bodice and

realise that her face was hidden behind a veil. Princess Freydís, he thought, with a jolt of terror.

The princess stood in silence for a few seconds, panting slightly from her exertions. Then she drew back the veil and met the priest's gaze with a look of furious defiance. She lifted her chin and addressed him in sharp, icy tones. "You're one of Víga-Barói's pets," she announced, using the priest's own language without any trace of an accent. "You've escaped."

The priest nodded vaguely and stepped closer, flexing his fingers as he imagined running them over her long, ivory neck.

The princess fixed him with her pale blue eyes and placed a hand on his chest. "Help me, priest. Sigvald has betrayed me." Her voice cracked as she looked up at the murals. "He's forsaken me."

The priest could not tear his eyes from the princess' face. The idea of such an impossibly beautiful creature in pain was almost more than he could bear. Tears filled his eyes and he let out a pitiful moan, trying to tell the woman that *he* would never abandon her.

The hardness vanished from Freydís' eyes and she graced him with a sad smile. "All I desire is to leave this cursed place and begin my life anew." She placed a hand on the priest's shoulder. "With someone who could protect me."

The priest dropped to his knees with a whimper and threw his arms around her legs.

Freydís gently removed herself from his grip and shook her head. "But my pitiless husband has forbidden me to leave." She waved at the tall, leaded windows and the bitter edge returned to her voice. "I'm trapped in here forever. Or at least, until I'm discovered by some wandering adventurer and murdered."

Bürmann shook his head in dismay, looking back at the exit.

Freydís shook her head. "His foul little trout-faced sorcerer has cursed me. I can't step beyond the confines of this palace. As soon as I approach the doors, my legs refuse to take me any further. And not one of his wretched sycophants will help." Her eyes widened and she gripped the priest's shoulder. "But maybe you could?"

The monk nodded eagerly and climbed to his feet, mouthing a silent cry of assent.

Freydís leant closer and cradled his face with her hands, bringing her lips so close that they were almost kissing. "You could carry me," she breathed.

The monk strained forwards, closing his eyes and moaning slightly.

"Can you do that?" she whispered, tracing a finger over his trembling jaw.

He took a deep breath and looked around the chapel. Then he nodded again

and waved at the door he entered through.

Freydís gave him a wry smile and shook her head, waving to another, smaller door, beneath the statue of the daemon. “I know a better way, priest.”

Bürmann’s head swam as they dashed through a series of empty halls and passageways. The rooms were full of Freydís’ handiwork: broken statues and torn canvas covered the marble floors, but the priest was blind to anything beyond the princess. As she ran ahead of him, his head filled with visions of such a depraved, lurid nature that he could not believe they had originated in his own mind. His muscles were wasted and cramped from days of inactivity, but he matched Freydís step for step, sprinting after her slender form like a hound on the trail of a fox.

After a ten-minute race through gloomy, abandoned chambers and lonely, storm-lashed gardens, they finally reached the vaulted passageway that led to the main entrance. Freydís began to applaud as she ran. “He did not predict this,” she said, pausing beneath one of the huge portraits that lined the walls. “You will not abandon *me*,” she spat, glaring up at Sigvald’s beaming face. “I’m not one of your feeble-minded toys.”

Brother Bürmann looked around anxiously as she grabbed the gilt frame and heaved the painting from the wall, sending it crashing to the floor. He moaned and tugged the sleeve of her dress, but she ignored him and dropped onto the canvas; clawing at Sigvald’s face with her long nails and letting out a desolate, piercing scream.

Bürmann attempted to pull her to her feet, moaning and waving down the passageway, but the more she hacked at the painting the more frenzied she became. Her long, dark tresses tumbled over her face and her screams grew wilder. “How dare you leave me behind?” she wailed, her body wracked by sobs. “How could you betray my love? I’ll find you, Sigvald! You’ll pay for this!”

The monk backed away, shaking his head, as she abandoned herself to her grief. He looked down at her, suddenly filled with doubt. Did she really wish to flee with him, or did she have something else in mind? He glanced down the passageway and wondered if he might be safest to leave her and make his way out alone, but it was no good. He knew he could never leave without her. He reached out a hand to pull her away from the painting, but then he paused, noticing that the passageway was suddenly filled with the stink of rotten food.

Warm flesh wrapped around Bürmann’s face, snapping his head back and slamming him to the floor. He tried to rise, but several powerful limbs were pinning him in place. The priest moaned in terror as his eyes followed the limbs to their source: a huge, slaverling head, swaying back and forth on a nest of

snake-like appendages and leering down at him. The grotesque head smiled conspiratorially and raised a tentacle up to its vast mouth, indicating that he should be silent.

Freydís was too consumed by her grief to notice the shadow that fell over the painting as the monster swung towards her.

Ansgallür the Famished watched his ward in silence for a few seconds, clearly relishing the sight of her pain. Then, as her movements became less frantic and she started to slump wearily towards the torn canvas, one of his limbs unfurled from beneath his jaw in a languorous, sinuous movement and lashed itself around her waist.

Princess Freydís howled in shock and threw herself back from the picture, but as she moved, dozens more limbs wrapped around her, raising her up from the floor as easily as a child and fixing the veil around her face. “Let me go!” she screamed, as Ansgallür turned her to face him.

Ansgallür opened his mouth a little wider, allowing a treacly substance to run down his chin. “Haven’t we had fun, princess?” he asked. “Are you really so eager to leave?”

“How dare you handle me like this, servant,” she wailed straining in his grip.

“It gives me no pleasure,” he lied, pulling her closer, “but you know I must keep you safe until the Geld-Prince returns.”

Freydís let out a hysterical burst of laughter. “He’s never coming back, you idiot. Don’t you see? He’s abandoned us both.”

Ansgallür’s watery eyes narrowed for a second and his face crumpled into a frown. “What a ridiculous thing to say,” he replied, but there was a slight edge of doubt in his voice. He waved at the grand architecture that surrounded them. “The Gilded Palace is his home. We are his beloved family.” His voice grew more confident and he smiled. “You’re trying to trick me, Freydís.” He waved one of his limbs at the struggling priest. “I’m not so easily beguiled as some. I know Sigvald would never abandon us.”

Brother Bürmann watched in horror as the life seemed to go out of Freydís. After glaring furiously at Ansgallür for a few seconds, she slumped in his grip, accepting defeat with a last, mumbled curse.

Remembering his other catch, Ansgallür turned towards the priest. He moistened his lips as he studied Bürmann’s scrawny limbs. “Such hungry work,” he muttered, lifting the priest from the ground.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sigvald paused and listened. A voice was muttering to itself in the darkness. When the mouth closed behind him, the walls had contracted in a violent muscle spasm and hurled him into a void. He was unsure how far he had fallen before slamming down onto moist, trembling flesh, but for the last half an hour he had seen no trace of light. “What’s that?” he whispered. The voice was mumbling gibberish, but he made for it anyway, stumbling off through the warm, pulsing passageway. After a while, his feet clattered onto solid rock and he began to make out a faint glow somewhere up ahead. The prince picked up his pace. He was not afraid, but he had an awful suspicion that he might have bruised his face in the fall, and he was desperate to check his reflection in the surface of his mirrored shield.

He entered a vast chamber, filled with moonlight. The distant ceiling was made up entirely of crystals that filtered the light down onto the rocks in thousands of dazzling columns. Sigvald stumbled to a halt, breathless at the beauty of the place. Then he remembered his fall and lifted his shield in front of his face. He sighed with relief. His skin was as flawless as ever.

“My lord,” croaked a voice. “Over here.”

Sigvald drew his sword in a quick, fluid movement and levelled it in the direction of the sound. On the far side of the chamber, animated by the shifting moonlight, was a mound of corpses. He stepped closer. “Who’s there?”

Most of the remains were unrecognisable—a messy jumble of severed limbs and glistening innards—but there was one large body at the top of the pile

that was still intact. It was a fat, ruddy-faced man, wearing a drooping felt hat and clutching a long gun. As Sigvald stepped towards him, the man held up a chubby, ring-laden hand and waved the prince closer. "My lord," he gasped, his voice trembling with excitement. "It's not too late. We can flee. We can still escape. If we move quickly. Before the beast returns."

As Sigvald reached the pile of corpses, he noticed the impressive collection of rich furs that were stretched over the man's rotund body. They must have originated from every corner of the Old World—he could barely recognise half of them. Then he saw that the fat man's legs were broken, folded beneath him at a hideously unnatural angle. "The beast?" he asked, eyeing the stranger suspiciously.

The man's face was ashen and pouring with sweat and he spat his words out in a high-pitched staccato, clearly in immense pain. "Yes, my lord. A great dragon. It haunts the mountain." He grimaced and rolled his eyes as he dragged himself into a sitting position. His small eyes bulged as he leant towards the prince. "It's a labyrinth. It's designed to confuse the dragon's victims." He tried to grin, but without much success. "Take me with you. I can show you a way out."

Sigvald laughed. "I've no desire to leave."

The man's grin faltered. He waved at the bodies that surrounded them. "The monster is insatiable," he said, with a note of panic in his voice. "If we leave now, we could survive. Let me lead you to the exit."

Sigvald pursed his lips as he studied the man's gun. "You're some kind of huntsman," he announced.

The man's eyes filled with terror. "That's not the point! We need to leave." He looked anxiously over at an opening on the far side of the chamber.

Sigvald followed his gaze and nodded, realising that must be the way to Galrauch's lair. He tapped the man's gun with his foot and frowned. "Did you really think you could subdue the monster with this? Did you have any kind of plan?"

The man's eyes narrowed as he saw another chance for a deal. "A plan? Yes. I had a plan." He removed his felt cap for a moment and mopped his brow. Then he gave Sigvald a coy smile. "There's only one way to defeat the beast." He tried to control his breathing. "Maybe we could come to some kind of an agreement?"

Sigvald's nostrils flared. He was clearly horrified at the suggestion. "An agreement?"

"Why not? If you're determined to fight the thing, I'll tell you how. Just

take me with you when you leave.” He saw the disdain in Sigvald’s face. “You’re clearly a more noble soul than me, lord, but you need a guide. You could wander through these caverns for an eternity. Just free me from this wretched hole.” He looked up at Sigvald with terror in his eyes. “Promise me.”

Sigvald did not answer for a few seconds and when he did, his voice was trembling with suppressed emotion. “I promise.”

The man’s face lit up in a jowly grin. “You don’t have much time,” he gasped, waving at the pile of bodies that surrounded him. “Dig.” He slapped the bloody mound beneath him. “Somewhere under here you’ll find a music box.”

“A music box?”

“Yes!” The man nodded furiously, waving at the corpses. “Be quick. The beast will return soon.”

Sigvald gave him a quizzical look. “How exactly will a music box help?”

The man sighed impatiently and began reaching down into the bodies, rifling through pockets and tearing open bloodstained jackets. “The dragon has two heads,” he said. “Both of them are mad. The left is full of malice and the right is full of shame. It’s haunted by memories of when it served the elves of Ulthuan, countless centuries ago.” He grinned as his fingers locked around something, but his smile turned into a grimace as he lifted up a shattered piece of hip bone. He dropped it with a curse and continued rummaging. “For most of the time, the left head is dominant. Up here, on the borders of the Realm of Chaos, it has the upper hand. The Ruinous Powers control everything.”

“What has this got to do with music?”

“Occasionally, the dragon’s memories overwhelm it with guilt, and the right head attempts to destroy its treacherous body. It tries to end its own life. It tries to atone for its misdeeds. Whenever that happens there’s carnage. The two heads tear into each other.” He gasped as one of the bodies fell on his broken legs. “Chaos is always victorious. The right head is always defeated by the left.” He grinned up at Sigvald. “But as the dragon is busy warring with itself, you can strike. You’re a brave soul. You could seize the opportunity. You could thrust your sword into its heart.”

Sigvald shook his head, still confused. “And the music box?”

“An elven relic,” gasped the man, slapping the blood-slick limbs that surrounded him. “Made centuries ago. If the dragon’s right head hears the melody, its thoughts will be hurled back through time. It will be consumed by shame and fury. Even a couple of notes of true elven music will do the trick. Open the lid of the box. The heads will fight. I guarantee it.”

Sigvald looked unconvinced and waved at the mound of corpses. “Really?

Your plan does not seem to have been very successful so far.”

The man glared at the bodies. “My men failed me.” He waved at the glittering walls of the cavern. “There’s something strange down here. The whole place is made of mirrors, but the reflections are all wrong. And these pea-brained oafs were so easily distracted. You wouldn’t believe how much I had to pay them even to enter this place and then, when the monster pounced, they were too busy to warn me. They were all looking at their own ugly faces. I had no time to trigger the music.” As he recalled the incident, the man began to tremble even more violently. He looked down at his ruined legs, as though noticing them for the first time, and started making a pitiful whining sound.

Sigvald stroked his jaw as he considered the man’s words. “Very well,” he replied, raising a finger to his mouth. “Keep calm, friend. I believe you. Let’s find this elven toy.” He grabbed the nearest corpse and shoved it aside. “What does it look like?”

The man forgot his pain for a second and grinned. “Small. Silver. Engraved with suns and moons. You can’t miss it.”

Sigvald nodded and began flinging bodies in all directions, grimacing at the blood and gore but working with a determined efficiency. Several minutes passed this way, with Sigvald digging and the hunter yelling frantic directions and jabbing his fleshy fingers every time he saw a flash of metal. Finally, Sigvald dragged himself free of the corpses and staggered away, gasping for breath.

“Don’t stop!” wailed the man. “There’s no other way. Don’t give up.”

Sigvald spent a few seconds wiping the blood from his armour and muttering curses, then he stepped back towards the pile of bodies and held out his hand to the hunter. He was holding a small box made of intricately filigreed silver.

“That’s it!” cried the man, leaning forward to snatch it.

Sigvald raised his eyebrows and stepped back, keeping the box out of the man’s reach. He held it up into a shaft of light and rolled it between his finger and thumb, admiring the craftsmanship. It was slightly dented on one side, but otherwise quite beautiful. “How does it open?” he asked. “There’s no catch.”

“Don’t trigger it,” gasped the hunter, slumping back against the corpses. “Its mechanism is delicate beyond belief. It took me hours to wind it. And I don’t know how long it will play for.”

Sigvald nodded. “Very well, but I’ll need to know when the time comes.”

“There’s a sun on the lid. It’s larger than the others.”

The prince turned the box around and peered at it. “The one with a face?”

“Yes, the one with a face. When the dragon’s almost on you, press the sun down until it clicks. The box will pop open and play a tune.”

Sigvald nodded and turned on his heel, heading for the archway.

“Wait!” screamed the hunter. “What about me? You promised you’d free me from this wretched place!”

Sigvald laughed and shook his head. “Of course,” he cried, stepping back towards the bodies.

As the hunter held out his hand, Sigvald drew his sword and shoved it straight through his heart.

“Consider yourself free,” he whispered, with his face only an inch from the hunter’s.

The man’s eyes bulged in shock. Then, as Sigvald withdrew the blade, he slumped back against the corpses, as lifeless as his servants.

Sigvald calmly wiped his rapier on the man’s luxurious furs and strolled back towards the archway. It led into a broad passage carved from the same glittering crystals as everything else. As he headed away from the cavern, the moonlight seemed to follow him—flashing and pulsing in the rock, even after he had turned several winding corners and climbed down a long, narrow stair. He peered up at the jagged ceiling and wondered how the light could reach so far down. “Mirrors,” he muttered under his breath, remembering the hunter’s words. “They must be designed to bounce the light down here somehow.”

He paused and stepped closer to the wall. His face swam into view, rippling across the sparkling crystals. He frowned. “Is that me?” His features were exploded over the surface of the rock—fragmented into a jumble of eyes and noses. He looked closer and saw that something else was mixed up with his reflection: black, featureless eyes and iridescent blue feathers. He opened his mouth to speak and saw it reflected as a lurid yellow beak, screaming silently back at him. Sigvald frowned. This must be what the hunter was referring to. A less developed mind would probably be terrified by such a distorted image.

His courage faltered as he edged closer to the wall. The nearer he got, the more his face splintered and changed. Then he focussed on a single facet of the rock, showing one of his clear, blue eyes. “Perfect,” he sighed. His heart pounded as he recalled just how handsome he was. Even after all the incredible sights of the last few days, he could think of nothing to match his own, peerless beauty. With a contented sigh, he turned away from the rock and carried on down the passageway.

As he made his way down into the bowels of the mountain, the air grew even colder. His breath trailed after him in sparkling, dewy clouds and ice began

to stiffen the joints of his armour. Progress was slow. His limbs jerked marionette-like and every few moments he would be distracted by a strange reflection of his own face. Each piece of mirrored rock revealed something even more bizarre, but each time Sigvald managed to focus on one of his own noble features and move on again with a smile.

After half a mile, he reached another set of stairs, but this time they led down into a darkness too profound to be pierced by the refracted moonlight. He paused and listened for a moment. There was a low rumbling sound drifting up from the inky depths. “Galrauch,” he muttered, gripping the music box a little tighter as he began to climb down. He used his free hand to feel his way along the wall and took tiny, careful steps. He had no desire to tumble into a crevasse and give himself an ugly scar. As he descended, his feet crunched against something. He froze, listening to see if the breathing sound had changed. It carried on rumbling just as before and he sighed with relief. Then he crouched down low, trying to see what he had kicked. The darkness was complete, but as he ran his fingers over the steps, they brushed against an unmistakeable shape: a human skull. Unsurprised, he carried on.

Sigvald stumbled awkwardly and realised there were no more steps. The rumbling sound of breathing surrounded him as he drew his sword and edged slowly forwards.

A bone exploded beneath his foot with a loud *crack*.

The breathing stopped.

Sigvald grinned in the dark, positioning his thumb over the elven toy as a pair of eyes appeared in front of him, each the size of a dinner plate and burning with crimson fire.

“Galrauch,” said Sigvald, without a trace of fear. “I’ve brought you a gift.”

As the eyes swung slowly around, independent of each other, their baleful glow shimmered over an ancient, scaled hide, hinting at a creature of incredible size.

Sigvald waited until the monster was so close he could feel its warm breath rippling through his hair. Finally, as a row of talons settled on the ground just a few feet away from him, he pressed the button. There was a satisfying *click* and the lid dropped to the ground. Delicate needles of sunlight fanned out from the box, flashing over the rocks and glinting over the scales of the monstrous creature. Then, with a clicking, whirring buzz, a tiny silver wren rose serenely from the box.

Sigvald’s grin froze on his face.

As the wren emerged, he saw that it was slumped at an odd, drunken angle.

With a rush of horror he recalled the dent in the side of the box.

The bird opened its beak and a thin, tuneless screech echoed through the darkness.

As the awful sound faded, Sigvald held his breath and looked up into the bloody orbs hovering over him.

Then he dived across the ground.

As Sigvald rolled away, there was a huge explosion of light and sound. A column of fire lashed over the rocks where he had been standing, billowing up over the ceiling and revealing a vast cavern piled high with bones.

The prince tumbled onto his feet and sprinted, feeling his hair shrivelling on the back of his head.

Flames rolled and mushroomed over the rocks as Sigvald dived for cover, landing heavily behind a pile of bones. "Idiot," he cursed, glaring at the crooked wren in his hand. He threw the toy on the ground and stamped on it, scattering screws, cogs and springs over the rocks.

Over on the far side of the cavern, the dragon heaved its massive bulk in his direction, raising its tattered wings over its heads.

Sigvald gasped. As flames spiralled around it, he saw that the monster was over thirty feet tall. Its ancient, crimson scales were lined with terrible wounds and its long neck was split right down the middle. He realised that rather than being two-headed, the creature had simply torn its original head into two halves. As he watched in disbelief, the two sides of the head snaked around each other, roaring furiously and drooling liquid fire.

Sigvald ducked as the creature launched another torrent of flames. His armour scorched his skin and he felt his hair shrivelling again, filling his nostrils with an acrid stink. He cursed and lifted his shield from his back. Then he rolled and charged from behind the rock with the circle of mirrored steel held up before his face.

Before the dragon had chance to draw another breath, he leapt up onto one of its legs and plunged his blade deep into its thigh.

The monster let out another deafening screech and lashed out with a huge, forked tail. Its fury was so intense that it smashed a hole through the wall, revealing another, smaller cavern.

Sigvald threw himself through the explosion of crystals and smoke and crashed to the ground in the newly revealed cave.

Galrauch whirled around, smashing even more of the wall as it rounded on the prince.

Sigvald dropped to his knees behind his shield as another column of fire

rolled towards him. The force of the impact shoved him back across the polished stones and his arms trembled with the exertion of holding the shield in place, but the metal was true and the flames roared harmlessly over his head.

As the blast dropped away, Sigvald scrambled to his feet and charged again, hammering his sword into one of its long claws.

Galrauch's roar spiralled into an ear-splitting screech and it launched itself back against the cave wall, with Sigvald still dangling from its foot. As the full weight of the monster slammed against the rocks, the whole chamber began to collapse. Great clumps of crystal began crashing to the ground and it seemed as though the mountain itself groaned in sympathy for the creature's wound.

Sigvald loosed his sword and rolled clear, raising his shield over his head as a storm of rocks clattered over him. As he bounded to his feet he saw the dragon clawing wildly at the collapsing wall, carving great rents in the rock with its thrashing talons. The whole cavern slumped and shifted with a series of grinding moans and Sigvald span around, looking desperately for an escape route.

The dragon let out another furious screech as it tumbled back through the hole it had created and Sigvald saw that it had revealed a third cave, and this one was glowing with moonlight.

He dashed back towards the monster and scrambled up over its heaving torso. As he climbed, the creature's heads snaked round towards him, its wide, drooling jaws dripping with fire.

Sigvald leapt over the dragon's shoulder and landed in the cavern beyond, rolling clear just as Galrauch slammed to the ground behind him.

The ground sloped up away from him towards another archway and another stair. Sigvald dashed towards the exit, but before he was halfway across the cave he stumbled to a halt and shook his head. He turned around to face Galrauch with a furious look on his face. The dragon hauled its massive body upright and glared back at him, shrouded in fire and smoke as it rose up to its full height. Sigvald's rapier looked like a child's toy as it wobbled between the joints of the creature's massive claw.

Sigvald threw his shield to the ground and strode towards the dragon with a defiant swagger. "You are a lizard," he cried, "and I am Sigvald the Magnificent!" His eyes flashed as he pointed to the ground. "Prostrate yourself, animal! How dare you even look me in the eye!"

Galrauch hesitated, confused by the fearlessness of its tiny opponent.

"Kneel, lizard!" screamed Sigvald. His face was purple and corded with throbbing veins. "You will *not* deny me my prize."

Galrauch shuffled backwards, seemingly on the verge of retreat. Then it

raised its wings, filling the whole cavern with a tattered canopy of dragon hide and let out another deafening screech.

Sigvald clawed at his scorched hair and howled in frustration as he realised the monster was not going to obey him. He sprinted across the shattered stones and threw himself at the rearing dragon.

Galrauch belched another blinding gout of fire, but Sigvald was already clambering up its chest with his sword back in his hand. The monster continued screeching as it launched itself at the far wall.

The dragon exploded from the mountainside in a cloud of smoke and dust, launching itself into the night sky with a single beat of its vast wings.

Sigvald tumbled free and crashed down onto the crystal slopes, bouncing and jolting over the rocks like a broken doll. After rolling and flailing wildly for a few seconds, he finally crunched into the side of a large boulder. He lay motionless for a moment, then sat up with a hoarse whimper. He saw his reflection in the crystal and gasped. His golden locks were gone, replaced by a shrivelled mass of black spirals, and the delicate strands of filigree were hanging, twisted and broken from his cuirass. He slumped back in horror, gingerly pressing his hands against a deep gash in his cheek. “Belus,” he whispered, “I gave you my soul. How can you abandon me to ugliness?”

As Sigvald sat there, clutching his head in hands, he thought he heard a voice, drifting on the ice-laden wind. “Sigvald,” it seemed to cry. He looked up and peered through the snowstorm. He felt a flood of relief as he recognised Oddrún’s teetering, lurching gait. The chancellor was rushing up the mountain towards him, appearing and disappearing as the columns of snow whirled around him. The prince leant forward, trying to make out the words. As the wind shifted direction, he caught a brief snatch: “—you! Watch out!” was all he could hear.

“Oddrún,” he gasped, lurching to his feet. He winced as he stood, and looked down to see a jagged hole in one of his ornate greaves. “Help me Oddrún!” he cried, waving at his scorched hair and his ruined armour. “I’m hideous.”

“Above you!” came Oddrún’s reply, slicing through the storm.

Sigvald cursed as he remembered the dragon. He leapt aside just in time to avoid a column of fire that lashed across the rocks towards him. As he tumbled to a halt, he looked up to see Galrauch swooping away into the darkness, trailing flames and smoke.

Sigvald climbed awkwardly to his feet and limped towards the distant shape of Oddrún. “Ask the head,” he cried. “How can I kill it?”

Sigvald’s words were snatched away by the bitter wind and he cursed,

looking around for a sign of the dragon. The sky was still pulsing with garish colours and the same lunatic carnival was still drifting overhead, but there was no sign of Galrauch. “He’s fled,” muttered Sigvald in disbelief. Rage consumed him and he clambered up onto a rock to scour the heaving, mountainous clouds. “The skull is mine,” he spat, wrenching out a clump of his blackened hair. “I will *not* be denied my prize.” He raised the fistful of hair to the heavens and howled into the storm. “Fight me, you spineless lizard!”

The whole mountain shuddered as Galrauch slammed into it. An explosion of ice, snow and crystals enveloped the prince as he fell from his perch and hurtled through the air. He landed with a grunt. Terrible pain knifed into the side of his chest. As the clouds whirled around him, he sensed the dragon’s huge mass rushing towards him across the rocks. Sigvald tried to scramble away but the pain in his side was incredible. He groaned in confusion as he saw a dark fountain of blood pouring from a gash in his breastplate. “How?” he gasped, rolling down into a crevasse. As he crunched down onto the rocks, he began to feel an unfamiliar emotion: fear for his life. “Belus,” he gasped, clutching at the wound and trying to stem the blood. “I gave you my soul. We made a pact. This can’t be—”

Sigvald’s words died in his mouth as the two heads of the dragon loomed into view. The separate halves of the creature’s neck snaked around each other as the heads swooped lower. “I’m immortal,” Sigvald tried to explain, but his mouth was filling up with blood and the words came out as a garbled belch.

Galrauch rocked back on its haunches to study its supine victim, creating a small landslide as it settled down to enjoy its kill. Shattered crystals tumbled over the prince, leaving a web of fine cuts over his face.

As the dragon drew back its heads for a final blast of fire, Sigvald heard Oddrún, still calling to him from the distance. He looked back down the slope and reached out a desperate hand to the chancellor, but knew there was no way he could reach him in time. Oddrún had opened the gold casket and raised it over his head. He was yelling something, but the storm was still too fierce for Sigvald to be sure of his words.

Galrauch looked up at the sound of Oddrún’s cry.

“The Sundered?” croaked Sigvald, shaking his head as he finally made out Oddrún’s words. “What?” He thought he must be mistaken. What could that mean? Before he could think any more about it, white hot pain exploded in his leg. Sigvald screamed and looked back at the dragon in horror. Rather than incinerating him, the creature had sliced one of its long talons through the hole in his leg armour. It was playing with him like a cat with a mouse.

As the prince prepared himself for a slow, painful death, he heard Oddrún's voice again. "The Sundered! The Sundered!" the chancellor was howling, as though it was the answer to everything.

Sigvald writhed in agony as Galrauch slowly tore the flesh away from his leg. Then, with his own blood raining down on him, the prince suddenly began to laugh. "The Sundered," he groaned, "of course."

Ignoring the awful pain in his leg and his chest, Sigvald drew a deep, ragged breath and began to sing. The prince's voice was no less beautiful than his flesh and it rang out through the storm with heartbreaking clarity. The death song of the elven slave had haunted him for weeks—ever since the night of Baron Schüler's arrival—and as he sang it now he felt all the tragedy of her proud, doomed race. The words tumbled out of him in a magnificent, spiralling polyphony, as though they had a will of their own. He forgot everything: the dragon, his wounds, the storm; all of it slipped away as he lurched to his feet, closed his eyes and allowed the song to tear through him. His heart pounded as he sang and it seemed as though a whole chorus of elves were joining his lament. He climbed up onto one of the rocks and raised his chin, lifting his voice to the heavens and abandoning himself to the terrible pathos of the melody.

Sigvald felt rough hands shaking him. He opened his eyes to see Oddrún looming over him. The prince's song faltered and he shook his head in confusion, unsure how the chancellor had suddenly reached his side. He had lost all track of time as he sang.

"We must flee," said the giant.

Sigvald's eyes were full of tears as he looked up at his chancellor. The echoes of the ancient song were still ringing in his ears. "What?" he gasped.

Oddrún gestured up the mountain and Sigvald saw that the dragon was attempting to devour itself. Sigvald's song had injured it more fatally than any weapon could have done. As it smashed its way across the glittering rocks, its two heads were lunging at each other, tearing long wounds in its winding necks and screaming in pain and anger. The huge creature was shrouded in smoke and as it rolled around, whole chunks of the mountain disintegrated, tumbling down towards them.

Sigvald attempted to climb down from his perch, but as the power of the song left him, so did his strength. He fell to the ground, gasping as he saw the extent of his injuries. "How can this be?" he groaned, looking up at Oddrún and waving to the blood pouring from his ruined armour.

Oddrún nodded. "The dragon's talons. They're charged with the power of its god." He hauled Sigvald up from the ground. "We have to go."

Sigvald nodded weakly. Then his body stiffened and he grabbed Oddrún's tatty robes. "The talons!" he gasped. "Belus won't aid me unless I take one."

Oddrún shook his head. "Impossible," he said, waving up at the thrashing, screeching dragon.

Sigvald narrowed his eyes. "I *will* have that brass skull."

They both looked up at Galrauch and saw that one of the heads had locked its jaws around the throat of the other, pinning it to the ground. The dragon's huge wings were beating wildly, covering the mountainside with rolling clouds of smoke, but its body was sprawled motionless as the two heads duelled.

"This is my chance," gasped Sigvald, lurching back towards the creature. The tattered muscles in his leg immediately gave way and he fell to the ground with a curse. He looked back at Oddrún, his eyes burning with hunger. "Quick!" he cried. "You'll have to do it."

The chancellor flinched and backed away, shaking his head, but as he saw the determination in Sigvald's eyes, his narrow shoulders slumped and he looked around for a weapon. There was a long shard of crystal lying on the ground nearby, so he grabbed it and hurried up towards the struggling monster.

As he neared the jumble of thrashing limbs and trembling wings, Oddrún paused, unsure how to proceed.

"There!" cried Sigvald, as a bloody claw slammed down a few feet away.

Oddrún acted fast, before he could consider the insanity of the situation. He gripped the shard of crystal in both hands and hammered it down with all his strength, slicing it into one of the dragon's long toes.

Galrauch let out an agonised shriek and withdrew its claw in a spray of blood.

Oddrún raised his arms over his head to protect himself, but the dragon was too busy destroying itself to attack. The giant looked down to see a severed toe at his feet. The thing was as big as his arm and pumping gouts of black blood over the rocks. It ended in a long, blue-grey talon.

Sigvald's ashen, blood-splattered face lit up in a broad grin.

As Oddrún stumbled back towards him, clutching the talon under his arm, Sigvald's laughter rang out, as clear and musical as an elven song.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sigvald limped into the pavilion. He was bleeding heavily from countless wounds, only a few blackened clumps of hair were left on his head and his handsome features were lined with scars, but, despite everything that had happened to him, there was a defiant grin on his face. “I have it,” he gasped, hurling the bloody talon onto the lawn.

Belus Pül recoiled, turning its head away and pressing a trembling hand against its chest with a theatrical flourish. As Sigvald approached, the daemon hurried over to its scribe, waving at the nest of twitching limbs. “The deity’s tranquil garden was invaded by a wretched-looking youth, whose repugnant face was a vile mockery of its own child, Sigvald the Magnificent. The hideous changeling had brought with it some kind of filthy animal bone.”

This was not the response Sigvald had expected. The muscles in his jaw rippled as he glared back at the white-robed figure. “I’ve done as you asked,” he snapped. “I’ve brought you a talon from the dragon, Galrauch.” He closed his eyes and gingerly touched the blackened spirals hanging down from his scorched head. “*You* have let this happen to me. You have reneged on our deal.” He pointed at the gory mess below his knee. “We’re sworn to each other. You must make me beautiful again.”

The daemon crossed the lawn and as it walked, strands of grass spiralled up from its footprints. The green blades multiplied and wrapped around each other, plaiting themselves into an ornate emerald cabinet. Belus leant wearily against the glittering piece of furniture and sighed. “The heavenly being reeled under the usual onslaught of abuse, but tried to remain calm. It reminded Sigvald—for,

incredibly, it *was* he—that a talon imbued with the sorcery of the Great Schemer would doubtless have transformative qualities. Such potent magic could affect even the Prince of the Decadent Host. Only the most exhausting rites could undo such damage.”

Sigvald shook his head in disbelief. “You can’t leave me like this!” he cried, levelling his finger at the severed claw lying on the grass. “You sent me to face that wretched lizard, now you must restore me.”

Ignoring Sigvald, Belus opened the cabinet and nodded at a shelf inside. The scribe scuttled spider-like across the lawn, picked up the claw and lifted it up on a nest of spindly limbs, then it hurried towards the cabinet and placed it on the shelf. The daemon nodded in satisfaction, closed the cabinet door, and then stepped back to watch as the cupboard disintegrated back into blades of grass that spiralled down into the lawn, leaving no trace of the talon.

“Belus decided that Sigvald’s intentions were probably good, and resolved to allow him another chance to prove himself. The slovenly state of the prince’s attire repulsed the sensitive deity, but it knew that there would be no wisdom in rewarding its ill-mannered prodigy before the three trials had been completed.”

Sigvald let out a bitter laugh. “You mean to send me out into the world looking like this?” He folded his arms across his battered cuirass and shook his head. “I won’t do it.” He nodded to the miscellany of strange objects hung around the daemon’s right arm. “We made a deal, Belus. You owe me your allegiance.”

The daemon gave no sign it had heard Sigvald’s words. It looked down at its hand and smiled as a lily sprouted from between its fingers. As Sigvald clenched his teeth in rage, the daemon closed its eyes and sniffed the petals with a sigh of pleasure.

Sigvald clenched his fists as the daemon crossed the lawn and sat on the chair that hung from the juniper tree.

“What do you want?” he growled.

The sexless youth gave no reply, but it raised one of its eyebrows disapprovingly.

Sigvald limped towards the swing, grimacing with each step. “How can I please you, my beneficent lord?” he said, twisting his voice into a more deferential tone.

The daemon stroked its smooth head and smiled. It indicated that the scribe should return to its pile of scrolls. Once the creature was back in place, Belus addressed it in a gentle, caring voice. “As Sigvald offered his services again, the deity was reminded of what had first drawn it to the prince. Sigvald’s

fearlessness was intoxicating. Alone amongst his kind he was strong enough to serve such an elevated being.”

Sigvald attempted a bow, but ended up dropping to his knees with a gasp.

The daemon waved vaguely towards the east of the garden. “Luckily for Sigvald, the deity had no great ordeal in store for him. All it required was the death of a single witless creature, called Bargau. The treacherous oaf had long ago ceased paying tribute to its master and Belus Pül had finally run out of patience. Such betrayal could not be allowed to pass unheeded. The blessed one decided that such a simple trial would be easy enough to complete. Bargau eked out its pitiful existence in a forest just a few miles away.” The daemon paused, using one of its small horns to scratch an itch on the back of its hand. Then it continued, waving to the wall of the tent and the shapes milling around outside. “The dashing prince felt the trial would be far too dull if he was escorted by his soldiers, so he offered to leave them behind once more.”

Sigvald remained crouched on the grass for a few seconds, looking up at the daemon with a pained expression on his face. Then he began to smile and hauled himself to his feet. “It’s true,” he said, “that without soldiers, or even a sword, the trial will be quite interesting.” He stretched his battered arms up over his head and let out a sigh of pleasure. “I too am beginning to recall our first acquaintance, my lord.” He gave a single nod of farewell and left the tent.

As the prince made his way slowly through the gardens, the remnants of his army hurried after him. At the head of the crush was Víga-Barói, wearing his perpetual sneer. He bowed low before his regent and stopped him in his tracks. “My lord,” he sighed, employing his most velvety tones. “The daemon is a gracious host, but your subjects long to serve you once more.” He waved to the bizarre assortment of creatures and knights assembling behind him.

Sigvald looked up in surprise as the sea of tusks, scales and horns crowded around him. “Do not look at me!” he snapped.

Víga-Barói shook his head in confusion. “My lord, what do you—”

“Look away!” howled Sigvald, turning away and trying to hide his battered armour and his lunatic spirals of hair.

The gaunt, bearded face of Baron Schüler appeared as he fought his way through the crowds. “My lord,” he gasped, looking from the prince to Víga-Barói with an anxious expression on his face. “When will we return to the Gilded Palace?”

Sigvald’s face flushed purple at the sight of the baron. He closed his eyes and clamped his hands over his scarred face. “Look away, all of you! I do not look like this. I am *not* here.” His subjects shuffled awkwardly and began to turn

their backs on him, but Schüler rushed towards Sigvald with fear in his sunken eyes. “But my lord, what of those we left behind?”

As the baron knelt before him, Sigvald dealt him a fierce backhanded blow that sent him sprawling across the grass. “Leave me alone,” he cried, lurching off through the pavilions, pausing only to grab a sword from one of his men. “Oddrún,” he yelled, as he disappeared from view.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lights flickered silently on the horizon, burnishing the mountains and flaming along the edges of Sigvald's armour. No natural trees could have grown in such a place, he decided. Only a perverse whim of the Ruinous Powers could have placed life in such a blasted spot. The forest was probably no more than a few miles wide, but its dark smudge dominated the landscape, heavy with menace. The densely packed pines knifed out of the snow like a threat.

Sigvald grimaced as Oddrún carried him beneath the gloomy boughs. The terrible wound in the prince's leg had made climbing almost impossible, so he had strapped himself across the giant's long, twisted back. As the chancellor smashed through the branches, Sigvald swung his borrowed sword over the giant's shoulder, surrounding them with a cloud of twigs and creepers.

The oddness of the place was immediately apparent. As the branches snapped, they made no sound. Leaves fluttered and tumbled on the icy breeze, but they moved in a dreamlike silence. The only sound was Oddrún's heavy breathing and even that sounded oddly flat and unreal, as though muffled by an invisible blanket. Something else was strange. Despite carving a wide path through the needling branches, when they looked back there was no sign of their passing. For every branch they moved aside, ten more fell into place. As they progressed, the arboreal shadows grew deeper and all trace of the frozen wastes vanished from view. Sigvald began to feel strangely insubstantial. The long shadows seemed more solid and impenetrable than his own flesh.

"How will we find our way back?" muttered Oddrún, after a painful hour of struggling through the undergrowth. He stopped and looked back, but even the

towering peaks of the mountains had disappeared. He could see nothing but the trees.

“Wait,” said the prince, pointing his sword into the forest. “There’s something up there.”

Oddrún shook his head and placed his hands on his bony knees, gasping for breath.

“What are they?” asked Sigvald, untying himself and dropping to the ground. Oddrún gave no reply, still clutching his legs and drawing quick, ragged breaths as the prince limped off through the bracken, making for a row of pale shapes hanging overhead.

After stumbling a few yards closer he raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Oh,” he muttered. The white shapes were the skins of people, peeled from their bodies and hung out in the wind like morbid pennants.

“Oddrún,” he called over his shoulder. “Bring me Doctor Schliemann.”

The giant stood up with a groan and crashed through the forest to Sigvald’s side. He looked up at the ghostly shapes and a thin hissing sound slipped from his hood. Then he noticed the expression on Sigvald’s face.

“Aren’t they perfect,” said Sigvald with a grin, waving at the fluttering skins. “Quite beautiful.”

Oddrún flinched and backed away. “They were people,” he gasped. “Is there no trace of pity left in you? What have you become?”

Sigvald shook his head in disbelief. “What have I become? Where did that come from? Look at you, cowering under that hood.” He began to laugh. “Do you think you’re normal, Narrerback? Do you think burying yourself in sackcloth makes you human?” He snatched the gold casket from Oddrún’s hands and waved at the chancellor’s hunched, body. “Maybe you should think about what *you*’ve become, old friend.”

Oddrún shook his head fiercely. “I’m what you made me.”

The smile dropped from Sigvald’s face. “You know that’s not true. We made our own choices, you and I.”

Seeing that Oddrún had no reply, Sigvald wrenched open the golden box. Doctor Schliemann’s head had slumped to one side and several of the copper coils and pipes had been torn from his neck. “Doctor?” asked Sigvald, prodding his discoloured flesh and shoving his spectacles back into position. “What you know about this Bargau?”

“I will help you no more,” croaked the head without opening its eyes.

Sigvald cursed and fiddled with the cogs on the side of the box, but there was no response. The head remained motionless with its eyes closed.

“What’s this?” he snapped. “Traitorous worm. I made you immortal and this is how you repay me?” He grimaced at the rotten state of the head and softened his voice. “I admit, this is not quite what I had in mind for you, but I’m sure Énka could restore your appearance when we return to the Gilded Palace.”

The head remained silent.

Sigvald sucked his teeth for a moment and then smiled. “What if I offered you your heart’s desire, Doctor Schliemann?”

Still there was no response.

“I know what you want. Oddrún’s right. It’s wrong of me to keep you here against your will.”

The doctor opened his eyes. They were almost totally white, but he seemed to be watching Sigvald with interest.

Sigvald held the head close and lowered his voice to a whisper. “The thought of losing you breaks my heart, but if it’s really what you wish...”

“Kill me,” begged the doctor.

Sigvald placed a kiss on the doctor’s blue-grey flesh. “Of course. I promise. Just as soon as you tell me about Bargau.”

“You heard what he said,” cried the doctor, rolling his eyes in the direction of Oddrún. “He promised to kill me.”

“I swear it on my father’s grave,” said Sigvald with a slight hitch in his voice.

Doctor Schliemann looked from Sigvald to Oddrún and back again. “Very well,” he muttered. “One last answer. The guardian of these woods is named Bargau the Soulless. The creature’s a relic of unimaginable antiquity. It’s dwelled here since the time of a mysterious race known as the Old Ones. All that remains of its world is this forest. Some say it’s part of a larger forest that stood here before the great cataclysm—before even the arrival of the Ruinous Powers and the Chaos Wastes. I can’t be sure of that, but it’s true that Bargau’s pact with the trees is ancient beyond understanding. I’m not sure of the details, but I know that they’re sworn to protect each other. Their faith in each other has ensured their mutual survival, through all these long centuries. The trees will have already informed Bargau of your presence. In return, the monster will drape your skins over their branches in tribute, once it has consumed your flesh.” The doctor paused. “As its name suggests, Bargau has no soul, and a being without a soul can never be slain.”

Sigvald shrugged. “It’s not a god. There must be some way to kill it.”

“I know of none. Many have tried.”

Sigvald revealed his teeth in a feral grin. “I suggest you think again, doctor.

I can feel your eternal rest slipping away from you.”

Doctor Schliemann muttered a curse and closed his eyes for a few moments, scouring his thoughts for an answer. “Well, I know that nothing can *truly* be without a soul. Bargau may have sundered its flesh from its spirit, but the spark of life must still be bound to something, or contained in some kind of receptacle. Fighting the creature’s physical self will get you nowhere—it’s said that very little of its mortal body actually remains—but if you can find the object that houses its soul, maybe you could destroy it through that.”

Sigvald shook the casket from side to side, bouncing the head around inside it. “But where *is* this object?”

“There’s no way of knowing,” groaned the head. “Bargau would never be so foolish as to reveal its location. You’ll have to search for it.”

“But it could be anywhere!”

“No. It will be here, in this forest. Bargau is bound to the place. It’s the last sliver of the creature’s ancient world—a fragment of another time. Bargau wouldn’t take its soul beyond the borders of this forest. It would be terrified by the idea of its discovery. It would keep it close by at all times.” The doctor looked around at the trees. “It will be in here somewhere.”

Sigvald nodded. “Very well. And this is all you can tell me?”

The doctor stared back at him, with a glimmer of hope in his opaque eyes. “There is nothing else to know.”

Sigvald slammed the casket shut and held it up to Oddrún. “Very well,” he said. “I see what we must do.”

Oddrún recoiled from the casket. “You swore to kill him!”

Sigvald laughed in shock. “Bless you, Oddrún, I swore on my father’s grave. Have you forgotten who put my father in his grave?”

Oddrún backed away, refusing to take the casket.

“Remember your promise!” howled Sigvald, levelling his sword at the cowering giant. He nodded at the shifting, huddled ranks of trees behind them. “There’s no way out of here until Bargau is dead.” He waved at his ruined body. “And I can barely stand. Carry it.”

Oddrún massaged his head with his long, paw-like hands but gave no reply.

“Very well,” laughed Sigvald, dropping the casket into the bracken and limping back down the slope. “He’s clever enough to work out his own way home.”

Oddrún shook his head in despair, grabbed the golden box and lurched after the prince.

“If Bargau and the trees are allied in some way,” said Sigvald, slapping one

of the slender trunks, “the quickest way to draw the monster out is to harm the forest.” He nodded at the knotted muscles in Oddrún’s long, clumsy arms. “Knock one down and let’s see what happens.”

The giant hesitated for a moment, looking up at the pale, rippling figures drifting overhead, then he slammed his shoulder against the tree.

Finally, they heard a sound. A long, mournful bark echoed through the darkness, like the howl of a wounded beast. The noise did not come from the breaking wood, but from deep in the forest.

Sigvald smiled and waved for Oddrún to continue.

Oddrún shoved again and the roots tore free from the ground, bursting through the soil in a silent explosion of soil and splinters. The towering pine trembled briefly, then began to fall, crashing through the surrounding branches without a sound.

The animal cry echoed through the trees again and Sigvald peered through the shadows. Then he clapped Oddrún on his side. “That noise didn’t come from a tree. That must be our prey. He was just a couple of miles north of here. I’ve marked his position.”

Oddrún shook his head. “What can we do when he reaches us? Doctor Schliemann said it’s impossible to kill him.”

“Well, obviously I’m not just going to wait here for him,” said Sigvald, shaking his head in disbelief. “While you shove the trees over, I’m going to search his lair. He’ll never dream that we know his secret. He won’t be expecting me to hunt for his soul.”

“You’re going to leave me to face him alone?”

Sigvald shrugged. “Look at you, Oddrún.” He waved to the giant’s colossal frame. “I’m sure you can hold him at bay for a few minutes while I smash whatever trinket he has bound himself to.”

“No, I beg you!” cried Oddrún, looking around at the sombre pines. “Don’t leave me here.”

Sigvald sighed. “Very well,” he muttered, taking the casket from Oddrún. “Maybe there’s another way.”

“The doctor won’t help you anymore.”

Sigvald smiled and lobbed the casket into the trees. It flashed briefly in the dappled moonlight, bounced noiselessly off a few branches and disappeared from view.

“If you keep your eye on that spot,” said Sigvald, levelling his finger at the trees, “you should be able to find him.” With that, he turned on his heel and limped off through the trees.

Oddrún groaned in despair and dashed off in the opposite direction, trying to keep the trajectory of the casket fixed in his mind.

Sigvald became lost almost immediately. With no stars above and no sign of his route behind, he had nothing to guide him. Undaunted, he stumbled and crawled through the dense thicket, slicing open the silence with bursts of hysterical laughter. Despite his lack of clear direction, he was sure he was nearing the heart of the forest. As he limped through the trees, the temperature was slowly rising. There was no trace of ice on the knotted trunks and the leaves beneath his feet were brittle and dry. It seemed as though the closer he got to the centre, the deeper he sank into the past. He began to notice movement in the shadows—tiny shapes that peered suspiciously at him with amber, feline eyes, but vanished before he could discern their shape.

Another desolate cry echoed through the night and Sigvald dropped to the ground. Less than a hundred yards away he saw a vast shadow hurrying through the trees, shaking the human hides as it passed. Good work, Oddrún, he thought, realising that his chancellor must have torn down another tree. He waited a few minutes until he was sure the shadow had passed, then climbed to his feet and struggled on through the trees, heading in the direction the creature had come from.

After another ten minutes of searching, Sigvald noticed a thick, cloying smell, drifting through the forest. He recognised it immediately from Víga-Barói's surgeries. It was the sweet smell of rotting flesh. He picked up his pace as he saw glistening red mounds scattered across the bracken up ahead. "Bargau," he whispered, "you're such a messy eater."

Sigvald paid no heed to the bodies as he hurried towards what looked like a broad-backed hill, squatting ominously ahead of him in the darkness. He burst from the trees into a wide clearing and saw Bargau's home. Rather than a hill, he realised it was a huge domed mound, like the nest of a colossal bird. Its walls had been constructed from a gruesome collection of rotten leaves, bones and human skin. The thing must have taken centuries to construct; the bones numbered in the thousands. Several round holes glared out at him from the walls and he made straight for the largest of them, drawing his sword as he entered.

Oddrún froze at the sound of another howling cry. It was much louder, much closer. The tree in his hands was about to topple, but he wrapped his long fingers around it and held it in place, peering into the darkness. Everything seemed to be in motion; branches, leaves and moonlight swam between the ancient pines. He

hissed and lurched back from the tree. It fell as noiselessly as the others, rupturing and splintering in silence as it slammed down into the small, moonlit clearing he had created.

“Sigvald?” he breathed, trying to control his trembling limbs.

There was no reply, but as Oddrún watched in horror, the undulating shadows formed into a single, inky mass: a great hulking mound, shouldering its way through the branches towards him.

He reached down and wrapped one of his spindly hands around the casket at his feet. After a moment’s hesitation, he muttered an apology and flipped open the lid, to see the back of Doctor Schliemann’s head.

He looked up to see that the shambling figure was just a few yards away from the clearing. The rippling shadows made it hard to be sure, but he thought the thing looked massive—almost as tall as he was, and as broad as an ox.

“Doctor,” he gasped, reaching into the casket. His bandaged fingers slipped through rotten flesh and muscle and he withdrew his hand with a groan, seeing a piece of grey skin hanging from his grip. At that moment, a vast shadow fell over the clearing and Oddrún whirled around to face Bargau the Soulless.

Bargau did not so much have a body as a collection of body parts. Its flesh was a hotchpotch of bones, leaves and borrowed skin, all bound together by a patchy hide of moss. The thing was vaguely bird-like in shape: a long, creeper-covered neck, a chest of matted branches and trailing goatskin wings, all topped with an enormous bird skull, compete with a long beak and a crest of ragged vine leaves. As it smashed into the moonlight, it looked around at the damaged trees and let out another mournful howl, raising its tattered wings in horror and fixing its eyeless sockets on the cowering perpetrator.

Oddrún backed away, shaking his head and scouring the trees for any sign of Sigvald.

Bargau tilted its head and stepped towards him. It opened its beak and began to speak. The beak was motionless as the words tumbled out, and the voice did not seem to really belong to the creature so much as the surrounding air. “What,” it asked, in a voice like a nail being drawn from a plank, “are you?”

As Oddrún continued to stumble back through the clearing, he felt a thick branch snap under his feet.

Bargau flinched, as though slapped, and howled again. “Don’t,” it said, in its scraping, metallic voice.

Realising that no help was coming, Oddrún pulled himself to his full height and straightened his back with a *crack* of tired bones. Shame had caused him to hunch and cringe for countless decades, but now, alone with such a grotesque

monster, he decided to tilt back his head and allow his hood to tumble from his face. He felt a grim satisfaction as Bargau stepped back, clearly unnerved by his appearance.

“What are you?” asked the voice again, echoing from the branches overhead and seeming even more disconnected from the skeletal beak.

Oddrún studied the skins draped over the monster’s chest and saw elongated human faces, mouthing pitiful silent pleas. “It doesn’t matter,” he muttered, as the monster launched itself at him.

Sigvald dropped to his knees and gasped in pain. There was no light inside the mound and every few feet he stumbled over a root and crashed to the ground, scraping a little more skin from his ragged wounds. The place was a warren of crudely carved tunnels and stinking, rotten meat. Every now and then he fell onto something wet and yielding and pulled his hands back with a grunt of disgust, glad of the darkness. The further he went, the more the soil was replaced by body parts and pools of blood, and the more hopeless his quest seemed. “How will I find anything in here?” he muttered, using his sword to feel his way through the shadows.

After a while, he felt the walls drop away on either side and realised he was in some kind of open space. The atmosphere felt a little less oppressive and his footfalls echoed around him, as though he had entered a vast cave. The smell here was worse than ever and after a few steps he realised why. In the centre of the chamber was a huge circle of corpses. He felt the touch of rigid fingers and cold, slippery skin and stumbled to a halt. He pursed his lips as he reached out to examine the flesh and bones. He realised that they had been piled together with branches and leaves to create a gruesome nest.

“Maybe the soul is at the centre of it?” he wondered aloud, unnerved by the flat, alien sound of his own voice. He hesitated as he considered his next move; then, holding one hand over his mouth and nose, he grabbed onto a femur and hauled himself up onto the bloody mass.

Thrashing its translucent wings, Bargau jammed its beak deep into Oddrún’s neck.

The pair tumbled back, with the creature’s head lodged under Oddrún’s chin.

Bargau wrenched its beak free, shaking its leafy neck and howling at the starless sky. It was so busy celebrating the ease of its kill that it did not notice that Oddrún was neither bleeding nor in pain.

As Oddrún climbed wearily to his feet he felt another branch snap and noticed again that the creature winced. As it rounded on him, he grabbed the gold casket from the ground and lurched off into the trees, with the monster close behind.

Sigvald slid wildly down the inside of the nest, ploughing through ruptured organs and crumbling bones. He kept his hand clamped over his face as he came to a halt at the centre of the huge, reeking bowl. “Where is it?” he muttered, patting the surrounding carnage with his hands. To his dismay, there was nothing but corpses, lashed together with bracken and moss. His fingers traced across dozens of leering faces and broken bones but found nothing that could be described as a receptacle. “Where is your soul?” he groaned, flopping back into the rotting meat. As he lay there, feeling cold blood running over his skin, something rankled at the back of his thoughts. He had the horrible feeling he was missing something obvious. He played Doctor Schliemann’s words over in his head. “Bargau is bound to this place,” he repeated, mimicking the doctor’s lifeless drone. “It’s the last sliver of his ancient world—a fragment of another time. He wouldn’t take his soul beyond the borders of this forest.”

At the word “forest”, Sigvald leapt to his feet. “Of course,” he cried.

Oddrún pulled his hood back into place and ran. Every few yards his disobedient limbs sent him sprawling across the mounds of dried leaves, but each time he fell, he pitched off in a new direction, always staying a few steps ahead of Bargau’s thrusting, skeletal head.

After several minutes of wild sprinting, the giant began to find that his odd, reeling stride actually gave him an advantage. He lurched and swooped around the branches with a drunken fluidity and gradually began to leave the creature behind. Bargau howled in frustration as his prey raced away from him with no sign of tiring.

The bizarre race continued like this for nearly twenty minutes and Oddrún’s lungs began to burn horribly. Just as he felt his knees beginning to buckle beneath him, the monster halted and tilted its head on one side.

Oddrún took the chance to rest for a moment, slumping gratefully against one of the trunks and looking back at Bargau’s strange behaviour.

The monster was spinning around and jabbing its long neck through the trees, emitting a ragged snorting noise. Then it turned its head up to the canopy of leaves overhead and let out a roar that was even more tormented than anything Oddrún had heard so far.

Abandoning its prey, the monster dashed off in another direction, shrieking as it went.

“Sigvald,” cried Oddrún, lurching after the strange creature. “He’s coming for you.” As he ran, Oddrún noticed an acrid tang in the air. “Fire?” he muttered. After a few more minutes there could be no doubt—pale tendrils of smoke were fingering their way through the dark trunks and pooling in the hollows. Oddrún felt a sudden tingle of hope.

They burst out into a large clearing and Bargau dropped to its knees in horror. There was a huge, silent bonfire, blazing up ahead of them. Already the flames had spread from the mound at the centre of the clearing and ignited dozens of the surrounding trees.

As Oddrún stumbled to a halt behind the creature, he watched the flames dancing and leaping between the branches, enveloping tree after tree.

Silhouetted in front of the blaze was Sigvald, dashing back and forth with a pair of flaming branches and jamming them into the carpet of dried leaves as he ran. “It struck a deal with the forest,” he cried, his face locked in a manic grin. “It bound its soul to the *trees*. The whole forest is the receptacle. That way, the trees knew Bargau would never leave—never betray them.”

At the sound of Sigvald’s voice, the creature lurched to its feet, but before it could approach him, another row of trees erupted, shaking the ground with a series of silent explosions. Bargau whirled around, unsure which way to turn as tree after tree was engulfed in flames. Finally, it made a decision and charged towards the blazing mound at the centre of the clearing, but before it could reach the opening, the whole structure began to collapse inwards, spouting a thick column of smoke as its roof slumped to the ground. Branches and bones span through the air, leaving trails of sparks in their wake and Bargau cried out, in rage and pain. As it crumpled to the ground, lumps of moss, leaves and dried skin broke away from the monster’s flesh.

“Sigvald!” gasped Oddrún, stumbling through a hail of golden embers. The fire was spreading with phenomenal speed. Flames could now be seen in almost all directions and the heat in the clearing was quickly becoming unbearable. “We have to leave!”

The prince nodded in reply and threw down his brands. But before leaving Bargau to its fate, Sigvald strode over to the fragmenting mound of skin and leaves and drew his sword. “Not without proof,” he muttered, hammering the blade through Bargau’s neck and sending its skull bouncing across the ground.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sväla turned and squinted back across the Wastes, shaking her head in confusion. For a desperate moment, she could not remember where she was. Thousands of snow-clad shapes were stumbling through the deep drifts towards her. It looked as though the whole, gleaming landscape was in motion. Above this bobbing avalanche of snow-capped heads, veins of colour threaded the sky, sculpting the clouds into vast, leering faces and painting the mountains a lunatic shade of pink.

“You said we needed to follow the star,” growled a voice at her side.

She turned to see the hulking shape of Ungaur the Blessed, peering down from between the jaws of his wolfskin hood.

“But that doesn’t seem to be an option anymore.” He held his staff up towards the sky, so that the bones and fetishes rattled and fluttered in the storm. “Unless you see something I do not.”

Sväla looked up through the flickering moonlight, unsure what he meant; or who he even was. Then, as memories began to filter through her jumbled thoughts, she recalled the strange light they had seen. Ungaur was right; it was gone, but to her shock, she realised that she had not even thought about it for days. She had not been considering their destination at all. For as long as she could remember, she had just been plodding through the snow like a mindless automaton. Her old life seemed like a distant dream with only the endless snow as reality. She shook her head and tried to speak, but the furs wrapped around her head had frozen to her lips, and all that emerged was a muffled grunt.

Ungaur patted her on the shoulder and revealed his mouthful of black needles. “Don’t worry, Sväla, your suffering will soon be over.” He waved his staff back over the heads of the advancing crowds. “Hunting has become impossible and the salted meat won’t last another week. Your crusade is almost finished. Then you can lay your weary head down in the snow and wait for Völtar to carry you away.”

Sväla stumbled to a halt and pulled the furs from her face. Her skin was so cold she barely noticed the top layer of her lips peeling away. “I know what you want,” she croaked, “but you won’t get it.” She pointed her iron knife at Ungaur’s chest. “A shaman can never be our chieftain, however much he craves it.”

Ungaur’s grin remained fixed on his face as he nodded at the distant shape of Svärd. “I would never presume to steal anyone’s throne.”

Sväla lifted her chin, revived by the poison in Ungaur’s words. “I have the will of the tribe behind me.”

Ungaur waved his staff at the figures shuffling past. “Really?”

Sväla looked around. The Fallen were stumbling on, but their shoulders were down and their eyes were blank. To her surprise, she felt no trace of regret or doubt at the sight of their suffering. This was the only course open to them. They must fight or die. While Sigvald lived, they could not. She strode away from the shaman with growing certainty in her voice. “There’s no way back, Ungaur; other than victory.”

As Sväla lurched off through the snow, leaving Ungaur behind, she pictured Hauk leading her on towards her prey: straight-backed and fearless as he waded through the drifts. Her body was layered with scars and wasted with hunger, but as she recalled her husband’s strength, it seemed to flood through her. Her wiry muscles throbbed with such energy that she felt almost drunk on it. She picked up her pace and hurried after the ghost she had summoned from the ice.

After a while she noticed that her imagination was playing tricks on her. The figure of Hauk suddenly veered off to the left, taking her away from the pass she had been making for. “Hauk?” she tried to say, but the words just growled at the back of her throat. She found she was almost running through the snow to keep up with the figure. As it neared another narrow ravine, the ghost dropped to its knees and began to leap through the snow in dog-like bounds. In fact, she realised, it was not man-shaped at all, but more like some kind of hound. No, she thought, squinting through the eddying snowflakes, not a hound, a wolf.

She looked back and saw that she was leaving the others behind, but she could not bear to slow her pace. “A wolf,” she thought, forgetting that she had

conjured up the creature, “so far north?”

She scrambled and crawled after the wolf as it raced down the gulley towards a glittering frozen lake. “Hauk?” she whispered, as she saw the animal a little clearer. Had he become a wolf? Was this the shape of her husband’s spirit? It was larger than any wolf she had ever seen and as she gained on it, she noticed that it was looking back after every few bounds to make sure she was still following, watching her with cool, intelligent eyes.

Then she began to hear a soft, slightly prim-sounding voice. It echoed around the steep-sided ravine, seeming to come from all directions at once, but she had no doubt that she was hearing the creature. “The Norscan queen followed the deity,” said the wolf, “a servant loyal and true.”

“Völtar?” whispered Sväla, stumbling to a halt in confusion and awe.

The voice echoed around the rocks again, sounding close enough to be a whisper in her ears. “In her exhaustion, the brave warrior queen doubted her own eyes, but deep in her heart she sensed the unlimited power of the divine being. She sensed that one final act of faith would lead her to her journey’s end.”

“Völtar,” repeated Sväla, jabbing her iron knife at the storm clouds and breaking into a sprint.

The wolf disappeared from view, turning left at the far end of the gulley.

Sväla hurried after it but as she stepped out onto the frozen lake, there was no sign of the creature. Her disappointment was short lived as she realised why her guide had led her down the narrow pass. Glinting in the moonlight, just a few miles down the valley, she saw a vast golden palace hanging in the sky. She gasped and dropped to her knees. Tears of relief and exhaustion filled her eyes, as she recognised the building from her visions. “Sigvald,” she laughed through her tears, levelling her knife at the incredible structure. “We’ve come for you.”

As the others began to file out of the gulley behind her, a chorus of weary cheers echoed around the rocks. Valdür and some of the other elders dragged her from the snow and embraced her in fierce hugs.

“Sväla the Witch!” cried Valdür, raising his javelin to the massing crowds.

“Sväla the Witch!” they roared back, their eyes bulging in wonder as they edged towards their queen.

Sväla allowed herself a little smile as the crowd grew and the cheering continued. Then she noticed something odd: a flash of green in the snow. She stooped down to pick it up and realised it was the stem of a flower, ending in a single white lily. For no reason she could explain, the flawless petals filled her with dread. As the crowd pressed closer, howling her name and clapping her on the back, she noticed another sound, drifting on the wind.

It sounded suspiciously like laughter.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Autumn had come to the garden, plucking the leaves from the trees and covering the lawns with a carpet of brass and bronze. Long before they stepped onto the grass, two slender shadows announced the arrival of Sigvald and Oddrún. The shadows passed unnoticed over mounds of pulsing lilac skin and trembling amethyst wings. Sigvald's subjects had abandoned themselves to various forms of pleasure, filling the garden with a chorus of sighs and gasps. Only two figures rushed from beneath the trees to greet him.

"My lord," said, Víga-Barói, in his usual, unctuous tones. Then, as he saw what had become of his once-beautiful prince, he recoiled. "What's happened to you?"

Sigvald glared back at him. His beautiful mane of hair was gone and his scorched, blistered skin was littered with cuts and bruises. Even his ornate armour was twisted into odd new shapes, jutting out from his limbs like a series of glinting leaves. Without the gangly giant at his side, he doubted Víga-Barói would even have recognised him. "Where's the daemon?" he snapped, ignoring the knight's question.

"Lord," answered Baron Schüler, who was standing a few feet behind Víga-Barói. "The daemon has gone." The baron's sunken eyes flashed with hope as he studied the prince's wounds.

Sigvald's frown deepened. "Gone?"

The baron pulled anxiously at his beard. "Yes, lord," he said, waving toward the centre of the garden, "but I believe its servant has something to show

you.”

Sigvald grunted in surprise as he realised that the tent had vanished. Belus’ orchard was still there, but it was now surrounded by a low, stone wall and to reach his patron, Sigvald would have to step through a gate of intricately-wrought iron. As he limped towards it, the prince sighed in admiration. He ran a finger over the cool metal, tracing the outline of a naked, dancing figure. He shook his head and dropped to his knees for a better look, forgetting his pain for a moment as he followed the voluptuous curves of the design.

“Look,” muttered Oddrún, gesturing through the metal, to the orchard beyond. “The daemon’s servant.”

Sigvald reluctantly turned his gaze from the gate to the fruit trees beyond. A cobbled path snaked between the trunks, ending at the small clearing where they had previously spoken to Belus Pül. There was no sign of the daemon, but the pale, spider-like bundle of limbs was still crouched on the grass next to its scrolls of parchment, with its single ear turned in their direction.

Sigvald shoved the gate open and limped into the orchard, followed by Oddrún and the others.

As the prince approached, the scribe scuttled down the path towards him. When it was just a few feet away, the strange creature paused and, with an elaborate flourish of its needle-tipped arms, laid two scrolls out on the grass and then withdrew beneath the trees.

“Where is my patron?” cried Sigvald, waving at the huge bird skull in Oddrún’s arms. “I’ve completed the trial. Bargau is no more.”

The pale nest of limbs shivered slightly, either in fear or amusement, then scampered forwards and tapped its inky digits on the two scrolls.

Sigvald glared around the orchard with gritted teeth, then shook his head and dropped to his knees, gasping with pain as he stretched his torn muscles. He picked up the nearest parchment and squinted at the densely packed lines of text. The whole thing was beautifully illuminated, showing several images of a knight in flashing gold armour. Sigvald’s scowl vanished as he recognised his own face in the vivid, hand-painted scenes. He realised he was reading the story of his life, from the day he first encountered the daemon.

“Bless you, Sigvald,” he muttered, grinning as he studied the wild excesses recorded on the vellum. Then he paused and adopted a more serious expression. He had reached an illustration of two figures standing on the rooftops of the Gilded Palace. It showed the moment Baron Schüler first described the brass skull worn by Mord Huk. At the memory of the skull, Sigvald nodded eagerly and hurried past the subsequent scenes, until he reached the end of the scroll. He

held the paper up to the moonlight and shook his head in horror. The text described his return to the garden and explained the absence of the daemon.

Sigvald sat in silence for a few seconds, as colour rushed into his face. Then he let out a wordless scream and lurched to his feet, tearing the parchment in half as he rose.

“My lord,” gasped Baron Schüler, rushing forwards. “What’s the matter? What does it say?”

As Sigvald rounded on the baron, his face was locked in a hideous snarl. “My patron is too delicate to be in my presence.” His voice was trembling with rage as he waved at his bloody, ruined armour. “My appearance is too offensive.” He continued tearing the parchment into smaller and smaller pieces, spitting curses as he staggered back and forth.

The scribe scuttled away beneath the trees.

“Belus has gone!” cried Sigvald, grabbing the baron’s shoulders. His eyes were filled with terror as well as rage. “I’ve been forsaken!”

Schüler narrowed his eyes. “What of it, prince? You don’t need any help to capture that fortress. Why bother with this Belus Pül? You’re invincible. No one could deny you anything. No one can come between you and that brass skull.”

Sigvald let out a shrieking laugh. “Don’t you understand?” he cried, waving at the scraps of paper. “Without my patron, I’ll be in the ground within the year.” He pounded his fist on his dented cuirass. “I’m only alive by the grace of Belus Pül. The daemon is *everything*.” He clutched his face in horror and lowered his voice to a terrified whisper. “The parchment shows exactly what’s going to happen now. I’m going to grow old, Schüler. Old and hideous, like everyone else.” His eyes widened in fear and he backed away from the others, speaking too low for them to hear. “And then I will die.”

“Sigvald,” muttered Oddrún, waving at the ground.

The prince stared back at him, uncomprehending. Then he shook his head, trying to remove the awful visions that were flooding his mind. “What?” he said quietly, sounding utterly bereft.

“The other parchment.”

The prince eyed the paper with suspicion and shook his head. “I can’t,” he muttered. He looked at Víga-Barói. “Tell me what it says.”

The knight bowed decorously and picked up the scroll. “It describes your life to this point,” he said, squinting at the text. Then he looked up at the prince with a shocked expression. There was a slight hitch in his voice as he spoke. “Your majesty never told me...” He stumbled over his words, unsure how to continue. “I did not know the extent of your adventures, my lord.”

“Carry on,” snapped Sigvald, “and you’ll see how miserably my adventures end.”

The knight lingered over the passage for a few more seconds, clearly unnerved by something, then he skipped over the subsequent paragraphs until he neared the end of the roll. His eyes lit up and he leant closer to the paper. “My lord,” he gasped in reverential tones.

“What?” sneered Sigvald.

“You have... You will become a...”

“What?”

“A god,” whispered Víga-Barói, looking up at the prince in wonder. He dropped to one knee and lowered his head. “Your majesty,” he breathed, his voice trembling with emotion as he held out the paper. “You are to be elevated beyond the boundaries of the mortal realm. You will ascend beyond the firmament.”

“I’m going to die, yes, I know,” snapped Sigvald. He levelled a finger at the bird skull. “That wretched creature has ruined me. For the sake of some trees, I will—”

“No, lord,” interrupted Víga-Barói, furiously shaking his head. “That’s not what I meant.” He jabbed his finger at the parchment. “The story clearly describes your return, in your present—” he paused and took in Sigvald’s appearance with a grimace, “—condition. But then it continues to show how you will renew your beauty.” He leapt to his feet and handed the parchment to Sigvald. “It shows you entering the kingdoms of the gods. My lord,” he cried, “Slaanesh Himself will remake you and endow you with renewed vitality. You will return to the Old World, as a being of unimaginable power. Look!” he cried, pointing at the parchment. “Your divinity will be assured, and so will your victory. You will crown yourself with the skull of the Blood God.”

Sigvald shook his head. “You’re talking gibberish. No mortal can travel so far and expect to return.” Despite his dismissive tone, there was a slight tremor in the prince’s hands as he snatched the paper and looked at the final lines of text.

“Do you see?” asked Víga-Barói, gripping Sigvald’s shoulder.

Sigvald stared at the scroll in silence for a few seconds, then his shoulders began to shake with laughter. “Oh, I understand,” he said, waving at the shreds of paper on the ground. “Belus has left me a choice. Either I wait for age and infirmity to overtake me, or I head even further north.”

Baron Schüler looked from the prince to Víga-Barói in confusion. “Further north?”

Sigvald turned towards him with a lunatic grin. "Remember the lights you saw from the Empyrean Dome?"

Schüler blanched. "The Realm of Chaos?"

Sigvald nodded and let out another burst of rippling laughter. "Belus is testing my nerve to see if I will abandon the world and present my naked spirit to a god." He gave a grudging nod of respect. "My patron seeks entertainment on a grand scale. Only then will the daemon give me what I seek."

Oddrún hissed beneath his hood. "Belus has lost its love for you, Sigvald, that is all. You knew this time would come. Such a capricious being was bound to forsake you, eventually. All Belus wishes now is to watch you destroy yourself in the most spectacular way possible. The promise of the skull is just a trap."

Sigvald nodded, but as he looked back at the parchment, his eyes glittered with lust. The text described his return to the mortal world as an event of world-changing importance. The final image showed him bathed in unholy light, raising a flashing rapier over his head, with winged spirits spiralling above him into the writhing heavens. "Tell me, Oddrún," he said, looking up from the paper, "what is the alternative?"

Oddrún lurched forward, barging the others out of the way and stooping down to peer into Sigvald's face. "We could grow old," he hissed, his voice filled with desperate urgency. "We could return to our people and spend our final years in repentance. We could beg Völtar the Wolf for forgiveness."

At the name Völtar, the colour drained from Sigvald's face. "Do not mention such things," he replied, in hushed tones.

"Why not?" cried Oddrún. "Because it causes you pain?" He tore the paper from Sigvald's hands and threw it down onto the grass. "That's because part of you remembers how to be human."

Sigvald's lips curled back from his teeth in a bitter, leering grin. "And you think we could just start our lives again?" He pulled Oddrún's hood lower until the giant's head was just inches from his own. "Look at yourself," he whispered. "You're a *monster*. What exactly do you think 'our people' would say if they saw your revolting body lurching towards them?"

Oddrún wrenched back his head and loomed over the prince. "There has to be a way. Don't you see?" He waved at the scraps of paper. "Belus wants to ensnare you again. You have become boring and the daemon just wants fresh sport."

Sigvald drew his borrowed sword and pointed it up at Oddrún's disjointed frame. "I can only see one fool here, Narrerback. You're a monster and you can't

even see it. You're ridiculous."

Oddrún shook his head and backed away across the lawn, but as he went, he looked down at his grotesque body and began to mutter under his breath.

Sigvald strode after him, jabbing his sword at the chancellor. "You're a freak," he howled. "Don't you see? You're cursed! Cursed! Cursed! As much as any of us. You can't hide sin with a piece of sackcloth. You're evil, Oddrún, let that sink into your rotten skull. Whatever I decide to do, you can be sure of one thing: you are utterly damned."

Oddrún flinched away from Sivgald's words as though they were sword strikes, and at the word "damned" he clamped his hands to his head.

"Where's the doctor?" snapped Sigvald, as he approached him.

Oddrún gave no reply, so Sigvald reached into his robes and withdrew the battered gold casket.

"Doctor Schliemann," cried Sigvald as he flipped open the box with a brittle grin. "One last question!"

The head was slumped on its side. The doctor's eyes were open, but there was no sign of life in their clouded lenses. His scalp had been torn open in several places and there was a trickle of grey fluid running from the back of his skull.

Sigvald grimaced and looked back at Víga-Barói. "Where's the sorcerer?"

Víga-Barói dragged his gaze from the box's gruesome contents. "Énka, my lord?"

Sigvald nodded. "Yes—the fish thing. Fetch him here."

Víga-Barói bowed and hurried from the orchard.

Sigvald turned back to Oddrún. "Pull yourself together," he said, softening his voice and placing a hand on the giant's trembling shoulder. "Once he's revived, the doctor will direct me to Slaanesh's kingdom. Think about it, Oddrún: I will be imbued with power greater than anything we've ever seen. There will be no limits to what I can achieve. I could give you anything you wanted."

Oddrún lowered his hands and shook his head. "Nothing good ever came from such a source."

Sigvald smiled as he looked up at the gathering clouds. "I'm not so sure about that, Narrerback."



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sväla looked up at Sigvald with tear-filled eyes. Since leading the Fallen into the Gilded Palace, her doubt had been growing. Now, as the Geld-Prince gazed down at her from an ancient, faded canvas, she felt crushed, insect-like beneath his radiance. As she compared her scrawny, bedraggled shape with his handsome face and his exquisitely embellished armour, she wondered if Völtar might have led her astray. Could such a perfect being really be responsible for their curse? Then she noticed the device on the prince's shield. It was the same circular design she had drawn in the dust all those months earlier. Her heart sank. This *must* be the man.

She stepped closer to the painting, blind to the elaborate gilt frame and the billowing cobwebs as she focussed on Sigvald's piercing blue eyes. Could it be right to seek the death of such a being? Despite the playful grin on his face, there was a proud, distant look in the prince's eyes, as though he were gazing far beyond the confines of the mortal world.

"Don't worry, we'll find him," said Valdür, hobbling down the vast hallway towards her. His voice was weak and hoarse, but it echoed around the vaulted ceiling, causing the old warrior to flinch, as though he had disturbed the sanctity of an ancient temple.

Sväla looked back at him and felt her resolve harden. Valdür's body was ruined. His skin had blistered away from his face and his furs were hanging from his rounded shoulders in tatters. But he looked at her without any hint of accusation or doubt. How could she hesitate, when so many had entrusted her with their lives?

The final approach had been the worst; time had begun to play games with them. At first, the palace looked only a few hours away, but then, after what seemed like a lifetime, they had crested a ridge to find it further away than ever. Days became weeks, then years, then days again, until it was impossible to know how long they had been wading through the snow. She had watched friends grow old and die and then reappear the next day as young as when they set sail. By the time they clambered wearily up the winding, golden steps, only one thing was certain: less than half of the Fallen were alive to enter the home of their wayward son.

“Yes,” replied Sväla, turning away from the painting and closing her eyes for a second.

Valdür shuffled to her side and placed a hand on her cheek. “You must rest, child,” he said, waving back towards the huge doorway at the far end of the passageway. “I’ve told Svärd to order the men to hand out the last of the meat.” He waved at the empty hallway. “If the palace is empty, we may as well make use of it. We can sleep here while you wait for Völtar to send you guidance. Sleep might be all you need to bring back the visions.”

Sväla shook her head. “I can’t sleep in a place like this.” She nodded to the opposite end of the passageway. It was shrouded in gloom and dust, but another door was just visible, as grand as the first one. “I’m going to look around.”

Valdür looked past her down the hallway and frowned. “I don’t think it’s wise to go any further alone. The palace might not be completely empty. Remember how huge it is.” He shrugged. “Maybe Sigvald is still here somewhere.” He nodded at the knife in Sväla’s tattooed fist. “You might need more than that if you find him.”

Sväla gave him a rueful smile. “You’re right, of course, old friend. I won’t go alone.” She gestured to the blankets of dust draped over the portraits. “But I think you’re wrong about Sigvald. My heart tells me he’s far from his home.”

Sväla shook her head at the enormity of the palace. They had wandered down miles of hallway without encountering a single room. There was nothing but portraits, hundreds of them, all showing the same, grinning youth, posing heroically in his gleaming gold armour.

“We may as well head back,” said Valdür. “No one’s been here for decades.”

“We’ve come this far,” snapped Svärd, striding forwards and waving his javelin at the next door. “Let’s at least see what we’re all dying for.” The bitterness in his voice was unmistakable as he glared at his mother’s back.

Several other tribesmen nodded their heads in agreement and as Sväla turned to face the small group, she shook her head at the old man. “What good will it do us to go back? We’ve no food and no idea where to go next. If Sigvald isn’t here, then maybe there’s at least something to eat, or someone who knows his whereabouts.”

Svärd stepped up to his mother’s side with a sneer. “Tell me, witch, what would we do if Sigvald was waiting behind that very door? Bearing in mind what you said about his pact with the Lord of Delight, and him being immortal, I’m a little confused about how we’d actually kill him.”

Valdür opened his mouth to silence the boy, but then he hesitated and looked at Sväla to see how she would respond.

Sväla turned to her child with a look of such ineffable sadness that the boy’s rage faltered, and he turned away.

“All his life,” she said, “your father never doubted his people. He always believed that we could free ourselves from our curse, despite having no idea of its source.” She looked up at one of the portraits. “Now we know the source and you still can’t believe.”

Valdür shook his head and answered on Svärd’s behalf. “But if he’s *immortal*?”

Sväla studied the iron knife in her fist. “I’ll find a way. I know it.” She turned her gaze back on her blushing son. “I still have faith in Hauk.”

The emotion in Sväla’s voice silenced any further debate and they shuffled on towards the next door.

It swung open to reveal a small antechamber, leading onto a second, larger room.

The Norscans hesitated before entering and looked at each other in shock. The rooms were both hazy with smoke, drifting from a wide, inglenook fireplace in the second room. It was clear that it had been in recent use.

Sväla gave the tribesmen a triumphant glance, before edging slowly into the room. Her feet sank into a deep, lilac carpet and she felt a wonderful warmth seeping through her furs. Candelabra were mounted on the walls and several of them were still flickering, filling the rooms with soft, ebbing light and revealing the illustrations on the silk wall hangings. The images showed a beautiful, raven-haired woman, surrounded by hundreds of screaming, tormented men. Sväla grimaced at the pictures and moved on. As she crossed the antechamber into the larger room, she noticed the enticing smell of cooked meat and stepped over to the long, polished table.

She held a finger to her mouth as the men crept after her, holding their

javelins aloft and peering into the smoky shadows.

There was no sign of life, but as Sväla approached the table, she saw that dozens of silver plates were set out, as though for a banquet, and some of them were still full of food.

She closed her eyes for a second to savour the smell of the meal and when she opened them again, several of the tribesmen were gorging themselves on the stuff, groaning with pleasure as they rammed fistfuls of food into their mouths.

Sväla was about to protest, but then she noticed that Valdür was grinning at her and she relented with a wave of her hand.

“Looks like we’re not alone after all,” whispered the old man, grabbing a handful of meat and wolfing it down. Then he nodded to a door at the far end of the table.

Sväla nodded back and waved for the men to follow her as she walked down the length of the table towards the door.

As she reached the head of the table Sväla paused, noticing a plate of food that was piled even higher than the others. She shrugged and stepped towards it. In the face of such excess, it seemed churlish to abstain. She felt sure there would be plenty to take back to the others.

As she approached the plate she gasped and looked back at the men in horror.

They followed her gaze and saw what was on the plate. The colour drained from their faces. The meat was roasted to a chestnut brown and glistening with fat, but it was unmistakably a human head.

The Norscans grimaced and wiped their mouths nervously, backing away from the table. As they looked closer at the cuts of meat, they noticed other human shapes on the plates.

One of the men groaned in disgust, but Sväla signalled for them to remain silent as they approached the door.

She pressed her ear to the wooden panels and closed her eyes. To her amazement she heard laughter and music. The sounds were distant, but there could be no doubting that some kind of celebration was going on. She held up a hand to the others and continued listening for a few seconds. The sounds were too far away to be in the next room.

“Someone’s here,” she whispered, turning to the others, with excitement in her eyes.

Most of the men were still looking at the meat with disgust, but Ungaur the Blessed stepped to her side and nodded, towering over her with his fur-clad bulk. He ran a hand over the animal bones in his beard and looked from Sväla to the

others. "There are only a dozen of us here, Sväla."

Sväla shrugged. "We could walk away, I suppose. Travel all the way back to the main front gates, gather up a larger group and be back here in a few hours. *Maybe* there would still be someone on the other side of this door."

To Sväla's surprise, her son stepped forward in her defence. "She's right," he muttered, still blushing. "If we leave now, we might never know who was through there. This palace is enormous. We might never find another soul. And then what would we do? Wander these empty halls till we have nothing left to eat but each other?"

Valdür the Old nodded in agreement. Then he kissed the fetishes dangling from his spear and placed a hand on the door's ivory, serpentine handle. He looked to Sväla for her signal.

She raised her weapon, gesturing for the others to do the same, then nodded at Valdür.

Valdür swung the door open to reveal a series of interconnected rooms. They were linked by dozens of archways, each of which was hung with glittering, diaphanous curtains.

As Sväla stepped into the first room she felt as though she had entered a feverish dream. She could never have imagined such depraved opulence. Gold lanterns were hung from the ceiling, revealing rows of marble pilasters and casting dramatic shadows over the dark, plum-coloured walls. The marble was carved to resemble lithe, naked couples, locked in a series of passionate embraces. She allowed her eyes to trace over the writhing figures up to the plasterwork ceiling. The plaster was moulded in incredible detail and showed even more copulating figures, all writhing in ecstasy as they reached out towards the figure sprawled at their centre. Sväla was unsurprised to notice that the source of their pleasure was Sigvald. His rapacious grin was just visible beneath a forest of groping hands. As Sväla looked closer, her disgust grew. Many of the bodies draped over Sigvald were barely human: serrated wings, vermicular tails and porcine snouts were all depicted in erotic, loving detail as they caressed the laughing prince.

Remembering the danger of their situation, Sväla dragged her gaze from the ceiling to study the rest of the room. She realised that even the furniture was oddly lewd: the voluptuous, gilded curves of the chairs were all carved to resemble carnal acts of the most unspeakable invention.

"Sväla," whispered Valdür, tapping her on the shoulder and gesturing to one of the draped archways.

She saw slender figures moving back and forth on the other side of the

flimsy curtains. They were silhouetted against the glow of a fire and as their outlines rippled across the silk, they seemed as dreamlike as everything else. Sväla turned to see that most of the tribesmen were staring up at the plasterwork, utterly engrossed by the writhing figures. Only Valdür and Ungaur were waiting for her next order.

She looked back at the curtain. The music and laughter was emanating from the other side and as the silhouettes slipped back and forth, she realised that they were performing an elegant dance to an odd, percussive tune. She looked down at her wiry, tattooed frame and her filthy, torn furs and felt suddenly ridiculous. What was she doing here? She took a deep breath and clutched her knife a little tighter. Then she stepped over to one of the pilasters and looked up at the tower of heaving, marble flesh. Still holding her breath, she drew the iron blade across the palm of her left hand and flicked a long line of blood across the entwined figures. As the blood ran down the stone, she let out her breath in a prayer to Völtar, begging for the strength to tear down this palace of sin. Then she turned back to her men. They all now had their eyes fixed on her. She waved six of them to one side of the archway and six to the other side. Then she stepped up to the curtain and wrenched it open.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Mord Huk bellowed with disgust at the strange figure sprawled before him in the snow. The creature's body was a wiry patchwork of badly sewn skin and deliberate self mutilation, but it was not so much the thing's flesh that made him howl, it was the ludicrous trails of lilac that surrounded it. The creature was strapped securely to a frozen rock at the summit of a small hill, but its hair seemed to be alive, and as Mord Huk tightened his grip on its throat the pale purple locks trailed over his muzzle, slicing through his thick skin like razors.

"Tell me!" he demanded, in a low, guttural belch.

The creature giggled and squirmed as Mord Huk's slaverling jaws loomed closer. "Such a novice," it wailed in a creamy falsetto. "You could learn so much from me, dog head. I'm the Geld-Prince's most skilled surgeon. I could teach you how to extract information with real artistry. Instead of all this ineffective ugliness."

Mord Huk jolted his head back with a bark of pain, as another of the tendrils sliced into his muzzle. "Tell me," he grunted, lifting his victim's head and slamming it back down again with a moist *crunch*.

The creature vomited blood over its white, skeletal chest and laughed. "One useful technique is to tell the subject what you would like to know."

Mord Huk raised his huge axe over the creature's head. "Where is Sigvald?" he grunted, pointing the axe at the glittering palace drifting a few miles north of them. "His army has not come back. Where has he gone?"

"Ah, I see. That, I'm afraid, I cannot answer. You're right about the palace

though. He abandoned his home, and his wife even, so that he could wage war on you.” The creature looked up at the drooling, armour-clad brute hunched over it and laughed. “For the life of me I can’t see why he bothered. How could he leave such a delicious morsel behind for an ugly mongrel like you?”

Mord Huk’s axe sliced through the creature’s neck with a *thunk* and its head rolled from the rock, sinking deep into the snow and leaving behind a small lilac shrub of hair.

The champion backed away from the corpse and wiped the blood from his armour. Then he turned to the ranks of soldiers spread out below him, panting slightly as he glared down at them with blazing red eyes. He drew a deep breath and howled with such force that he stumbled backwards across the snow. “Sigvald’s wife!” he roared, jabbing his axe at the Gilded Palace. “Bring her!”



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sigvald felt the mountain shift beneath him, as though straining to be free. Oddrún staggered to one side as the surrounding rocks began trembling and lifting from the ground, shedding clumps of snow as they rose into the air. As they moved, they picked up speed, hurtling cometlike towards the starless sky.

Sigvald was delighted by the strangeness of the scene. He had never travelled so far north before and he felt drunk on the surreal landscape. He laughed, remembering that he also felt drunk because he was drunk. He looked down at the small green bottle in his hand, unsure for a moment how it got there. Then he remembered: the pain of his wounds had made it too painful to travel, even strapped to Oddrún's back, so he had ordered Víga-Barói to find him something to ease his discomfort. It had certainly done that. His whole body was tingling and throbbing with energy and his mind was a wonderful, jumbled mess.

Oddrún continued plodding wearily through the snow, with the laughing prince waving his bottle at the heavens. Soon, there was a whole shower of stones, springing from the ground and rocketing up towards the sky, flashing with refracted moonlight as they went. Sigvald's head lolled back on his neck as he followed their ascent, up through the falling snow, towards the low clouds. After a while, he realised that not all of the vast shadows overhead *were* clouds. The flying ships had followed them north. "Oddrún," gasped the prince, pointing his bottle at the nearest one. It was huge beyond imagining and carved from the rotting carcass of a leathery, bloated amphibian. Hundreds of gaudy sails were hung from its sides and flickering, sallow lanterns shone out through its bony hull. As Sigvald gazed, bleary-eyed up at the ship, he realised that he could even

make out pale faces peering down at him from the gunnels.

Oddrún glanced briefly up at the ship, before pointing down the slope. “Almost there,” he muttered.

Sigvald leant forward to peer over his shoulder and saw that he was right. At the bottom of the next crag was a line of black rock, carving a straight path through the snowdrifts and disappearing into the distance. “The road,” he cried, spraying wine on the back of Oddrún’s hood and starting to laugh. “Doctor Schliemann was right!”

Oddrún climbed carefully down the icy rocks and waded through the snow towards the road. As he reached the edge of the black rock, he hesitated. Despite the high drifts on either side, no trace of snow could be seen on the road. The giant leant out over the rock, peering into the flawless void. This close up, the road seemed more like a ribbon of ink, sunk deep into the glittering snow. There was no sign of edges or texture of any kind—not even the faintest glimmer of reflected moonlight.

“Look,” cried Sigvald, turning the giant’s head back the way they had come.

Oddrún turned around and they both stared in amazement. The crag they had just scaled down was rippling like a curtain in the wind. As they watched, the whole mountainside slumped and reared with the breeze, as insubstantial as smoke. As the wind picked up, even the snow-laden sky began to swell and bulge like liquid.

Sigvald took another swig of wine and threw the empty bottle at the cliff, laughing incredulously as it stretched and writhed through the air, before finally sinking into the mountain like a pebble into a lake. “It’s all falling apart,” he cried, rising up from Oddrún’s shoulders and wrenching the last few strands of blackened hair from his scalp. “Reality is collapsing. All of it—apart from the road.” He waved at the broad expanse of black. “See? Everything else is in flux, but the road stays constant.” He slapped the giant’s shoulders. “Quick, Narrerback.”

The giant trod hesitantly on the black rock with one foot. The surface held and he stepped fully onto the road.

They both looked up to see that even the air above was clear of snowflakes. A straight void hung over them, like a tunnel carved through the storm.

Oddrún made no comment and loped off down the road, with Sigvald still laughing on his back.

After several hours, the horizon began to change. Shimmering curtains of light rippled in and out of view, drenching the whole landscape with emeralds

and pinks and even forming briefly into recognisable scenes. As he watched from his swaying perch, Sigvald saw mountainous faces leering down at him from within the lights: everything from daemoniac monsters to innocent babes, flickering in the endless night.

They had left the army in the daemon's garden. Sigvald had told Víga-Barói and Baron Schüler that such a journey into the intangible should be for him alone, and ordered them to remain and keep watch over the Decadent Host. Now, as he watched images blossoming in the air before him, Sigvald wished he had at least brought the baron along. If anything could have convinced a doubting convert, it would have been this.

"We must be nearly there," he slurred. Then he laughed in delight as his words appeared in front of his face as a row of luminous script. "Look at this," he cried, sending more letters into the air. "My speech is real!" As new letters formed, they jostled with the others, forming an incandescent mess of consonants and vowels. "What an incredible place," he laughed, squeezing the giant's shoulder.

Oddrún gave a noncommittal nod as he trudged on down the road.

The further north they went, the stranger their surroundings grew. The mountains on either side became rivers of rock, snaking through the sky and pouring to the ground in huge, granite cascades, and the sky grew crowded with ever more putrid ships, each one shrouded in clouds of winged snakes that circled and dived around them like hungry gulls. Through the heart of it all, the road remained untouched, carving through the lunacy as surely as it had carved through the snow.

Sigvald pointed at the horizon and tried to cry out, but instead of words, another torrent of radiant characters tumbled from his mouth, and this time, the words were in a language he did not recognise.

Oddrún looked up to see two thin, black pyramids of rock rearing up ahead of them, surrounded by clumps of wizened hawthorn.

Sigvald grabbed the gold casket from Oddrún's side and popped it open.

The box was empty, but before Sigvald had a chance to emit any more of the dazzling glyphs, he noticed that a figure had appeared beside them on the road.

The prince immediately recognised the jerky, bird-like gait of Doctor Schliemann. The scholar was as young and clear-eyed as the day Sigvald first welcomed him to the Gilded Palace, decades earlier. There was a key difference, however: his flesh was as vague and insubstantial as the characters drifting around Sigvald's face.

“The Lucid Gate,” said the young doctor, staring up at Sigvald from behind his wire-rimmed glasses. His words rang out quite clearly. “A single point of clarity between two worlds.”

“You’re restored,” Sigvald tried to say, but the words just poured from his mouth as glittering, diaphanous treacle.

The doctor shook his head, seemingly able to understand. “Not restored, prince. My soul is still tied to the casket by your sorcerer’s artifice. My spirit is eternally bound to your service. It’s just that the proximity of the Ruinous Powers is enabling you to see a different aspect of my being.” His robes shimmered as he pointed at the gold casket. “As long as you live, I can never be free from that prison.”

Sigvald nodded eagerly, oblivious to the pain in the doctor’s voice. Then he pointed at the black pillars looming ahead of them.

The doctor nodded. “Chaos wears countless faces, prince. There are many different gates, in many different places, but if you pass between those stones, I guarantee you will leave the mortal realm.”

Sigvald tapped one of the swirling arabesques on his armour with a questioning expression. The curves were sculpted in the shape of a symbol—the mark of Slaanesh.

The doctor shrugged. “I can’t say what you’ll find beyond that gate, no one can, but it’s definitely possible that if you travel any further you will see the face of your god.”

Sigvald rolled his eyes ecstatically and plucked another small bottle from Oddrún’s robes. He peered at the label in confusion for a few seconds, then emptied its contents in a single gulp. As the giant plodded on beneath him, he held the empty bottle up to his eye and peered through it like a telescope, laughing hysterically as he surveyed the rippling landscape through the green glass.

After another hour of walking they reached the gate.

Sigvald freed himself from the giant’s back and dropped to the ground in a crumpled heap.

Oddrún stooped down and helped him to his feet, keeping a steady hand on the prince’s shoulder as he stood, swaying slightly before the two black obelisks.

The surface of the stones was unmarked, but there was movement inside: a steady pulse, deep within the rock. On the other side of them, the road appeared to continue, as straight as before.

“What do I do?” asked Sigvald. He touched his lips in shock, surprised by

the sound of his own voice. It was only then that he noticed the dazzling characters had vanished. "I can speak!" he exclaimed, turning unsteadily towards the ghostly doctor.

Schliemann shrugged and nodded but gave no reply.

Sigvald lurched towards him. "What do I do, doctor?" He looked back at the ominous stones. "Do I just step through?"

Schliemann opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, Sigvald threw himself through the gate with a bark of laughter.

Instantaneously, he reappeared, grinning and looking around himself excitedly. His face dropped as he saw Oddrún and the doctor.

"It's not so simple," explained Schliemann, shoving his glasses up his nose and nodding to the withered mass of hawthorn at the base of the rocks. "There is a ritual to be observed." There was a gleam of excitement in his eyes as he looked at the bushes. "First you must take a berry."

Sigvald nodded eagerly and rushed towards the hawthorn.

"Wait," grumbled Oddrún, extending one of his long arms and clasping the prince's shoulder. "He's lying to you, Sigvald."

Doctor Schliemann narrowed his eyes but did not turn towards the giant. "You know the wards that bind me, prince. I am unable to tell you anything that is not true."

"He's tricking you then," insisted Oddrún, stooping down to Sigvald's level and gripping his other shoulder. "Don't do it."

Sigvald looked up at the giant with a tormented look in his eyes. "It's just there," he whispered, pointing to the stones. "The garden of my lord."

Oddrún simply shook his head as the prince stepped away from him and plucked one of the berries.

"I *have* to know how it feels," said Sigvald, peering at the fruit as though it held all the mysteries of the universe within its taut, blood-red skin.

"Stand against one of the stones and draw your sword," said the spectral figure.

"Oddrún?" said Sigvald, nodding to the berries.

The giant backed away, shaking his head. "You're going to die."

Sigvald looked back at the berry. "Die," he said quietly, rolling the word around his mouth a few times. Then his face went slack and he stood in silence for a while, seeming to forget his surroundings.

"Prince," said the doctor after a few awkward minutes had passed. "You need to hold one of the stones and draw your sword."

Sigvald snapped out of his reverie and looked around in confusion. "What?

Oh, yes. Yes.” He weaved across the road back to the stone and drew the sword he had borrowed. Then he reached out and splayed one of his hands across the black rock. “It’s warm,” he said, looking back at the doctor in surprise. “It feels like skin.”

“Draw the blade across your tongue,” said Schliemann.

Sigvald pursed his lips and frowned. “Really?”

The doctor nodded. “Only by mingling the fruit with your blood can your prayer be heard.”

Doubt flashed briefly in Sigvald’s eyes and he looked over at Oddrún, who was now huddled on the road a few yards away from the gate. “Will you let me go alone then, Narrerback?”

The giant rocked back on his heels and clutched his knees, but did not reply.

Sigvald stared at him in disbelief and, for a second, he looked utterly sober. Then, as quickly as it came, the sobriety vanished—replaced by a dazzling grin. “You’ll follow me.” Then he raised the sword to his mouth and dragged the blade across his extended tongue, sending a torrent of crimson down over his chin.

“Swallow the fruit and speak after me,” said the doctor, with a note of urgency in his voice.

Sigvald popped the fruit between his bloody teeth and swallowed it, then nodded at the doctor.

The doctor uttered a single, guttural word in a language that neither Sigvald nor the giant recognised.

Sigvald mimicked him as best he could, but the wound to his tongue gave the word a lisping, mumbled quality.

The doctor proceeded to utter a string of vile-sounding phrases that Sigvald attempted to imitate through a mouthful of blood.

“You must keep your hand on the stone,” snapped the doctor, looking anxious and edging closer.

Sigvald nodded and leant more of his weight against the rock. His eyes widened and he looked down at his stomach with a grimace.

“Don’t move your hand!” cried the doctor.

Sigvald nodded furiously, but it was clear from the veins bulging on his neck that he was in great pain.

Oddrún clambered to his feet with a moan and raced towards the prince.

As the giant approached, the phantom doctor stepped towards him with a curse, holding his hands up to block his way.

As the giant stumbled to a halt, unwilling to touch Schliemann’s translucent

flesh, a flash of light lit up the gate.

Sigvald looked down to see that flames had burst from his stomach and were quickly enveloping his body. He looked over at the doctor, his face a mask of fear.

Schliemann looked back at him with a delighted grin.

The prince finally tried to flee, but found that his hand was now locked to the black stone.

Oddrún stepped around the doctor, but it was too late; by the time he reached the gate, the flames were too fierce for him to reach Sigvald. He reached into the fire with a desperate howl, but was forced back by the heat, collapsing to his knees a few feet away.

As Sigvald's body blackened and collapsed in on itself, Schliemann clasped his hands together in a silent prayer and closed his eyes.

By the time Oddrún looked back at him, the doctor was gone.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Oddrún sat for a long time, watching the smouldering remains. The giant's shoulders were slumped and rounded by despair and every few minutes he would rise to his feet to leave, only to sit back down with a string of muttered curses. Finally, he turned his gaze towards the hawthorn at the foot of the stones. Unfolding his long, gangly limbs, he loped over to the bushes and plucked one of the berries. The fruit was a tiny, crimson dot in his bandaged palm. He peered closely at it, just as Sigvald had done. Then he stepped over to the stone and plucked the cooling sword from the prince's ashes. Ripples of jade and cerise washed over him as he raised the sword towards his hood and stared through the Lucid Gate.

He stood like that for several minutes, as motionless as the ancient rocks.

Then, with a groan, he let the sword clatter to the ground and stepped away from the stones, dropping the berry as he went. He shook his head and looked around at the madness that surrounded him. "I can't," he muttered, turning his back on the rocks and heading back the way he had come, leaving the empty gold casket at the foot of the gate.

Oddrún paid little attention to his route as he stumbled south, with the flickering curtains of lights at his back. He blindly followed the straight black road until, after several hours, a little normality began to reassert itself over the landscape. On either side of him, the towering peaks reared out of the storm once more and the snow-covered ground began to look a little more stable. Even the skies became clearer: the ship-like carcasses drifted up through the clouds, leaving behind them just a few of the winged serpents, circling playfully around

the heavens, silhouetted by the twin moons.

After a few hours Oddrún recognised a path through the mountains and left the black road, retracing his steps in the direction of Belus Pül's garden.

"Where's the prince?" gasped Víga-Barói as Oddrún stumbled across the grass.

A crowd of expectant faces quickly gathered around the giant and he shook his head. "Gone," he muttered, in a desolate voice.

A chorus of whispers erupted from the strange assembly.

"Gone?" snapped Víga-Barói, raising a trembling hand to silence the others. "Gone where?"

"Dead."

"You're mad," replied Víga-Barói. "The Geld-Prince is immortal."

Baron Schüler barged his way through the crowd and looked up at the giant. "What happened?" he demanded, his voice taut with emotion.

Oddrún shrugged. "The doctor tricked him." He looked down at the blackened bandages around his hands. "And I left it too late to save him. I failed him."

"Nonsense," hissed Víga-Barói, his eyes wide with fear. "You've been driven mad by whatever you saw up there. I'll ask the prince's patron what's happened." He shoved his way through the wall of inhuman faces, heading towards the centre of the garden and the iron gate that led to Belus Pül.

Baron Schüler hurried after him and together they wrenched open the gate and rushed into the little orchard.

The white-robed figure had returned and was waiting in the centre of the lawn with the spider-like scribe crouched nearby.

Víga-Barói bowed low and adopted his most oily tones. "My lord, we've imposed far too long on your generosity. If you would be so good as to tell us the whereabouts of your servant, the Geld-Prince, we'll depart and trouble you no more."

Belus continued staring into the middle distance, as though it had not heard the sneering knight. Then, just as the knight was about to repeat himself, the daemon began to speak.

"Some tales grow in the telling," it announced, lifting its chin so that the moonlight fell dramatically over its face, "but many more diminish. And so it was with Sigvald the Magnificent. The deity had long dreamt of elevating this simple mortal and creating an eternal companion but even after all the help he had been given, Sigvald proved to be unworthy of such lofty ambitions." Belus took one of the items of jewellery from its arm—a bronze torque—and held it at

arm's length, as though it were suddenly repulsive, before dropping it to the ground. "The prince's flesh proved too weak. He was, in the end, unable to make the journey into the Intangible Realm. His demise was, perhaps, a blessing. The deity resigned itself to an eternity of solitude, and refused all offers of sympathy—asking nothing but privacy in which to nurse its wounds."

Víga-Barói lurched to his feet and glared at the slight, horned figure. "You sent him to his death!" he cried, losing all semblance of self-control. He drew his sword and levelled it at the frantically working scribe. "Just so you could add an interesting chapter to this pathetic, self-aggrandising myth."

The daemon's face remained as serene as ever.

"Stop writing," howled Víga-Barói striding forwards and slicing his sword through the scribe's twitching limbs. The blade cut through the thing's arms and sank deep into its eyeless face. Black blood erupted from the wound and the scribe staggered back, raising a forest of ivory appendages in a useless attempt to defend itself. The knight groaned with pleasure as he hacked repeatedly into the shuddering creature, covering his purple cuirass in tar-like blood and only stopping when the thing was still. He reached down into the pulpy, black mess and grabbed the scribe's severed, pallid ear.

"Carry on with your story then," he cried, holding the dripping ear up to the daemon. "Tell *me* how you sent the Geld-Prince to his death! The most excellent knight ever to grace these shores. Tell *me* how you killed him on a whim."

Belus finally fixed its cool grey eyes on Víga-Barói, and they were sparkling with mirth.

As the daemon's gaze fell on him, Víga-Barói's head snapped backwards as if he had been punched.

Baron Schüler rushed to catch the knight as he fell, but then he gasped in disgust and backed away, letting him fall to the ground.

As Víga-Barói's body collapsed onto the grass, dozens of long, needle-like limbs burst through his chest. He cried out in horror, but the sound was cut short as his mouth vanished behind a layer of pale skin. Within seconds, the features of his face vanished, leaving just a single, large ear.

Schüler hurried towards the iron gate as a pale, multi-limbed creature dragged itself from Víga-Barói's armour and scuttled across the lawn.

Belus Pül turned and stepped over to the juniper tree with the chair hanging from its low, knotted boughs. "The deity watched Sigvald's servants depart with a heavy heart," said the daemon, looking over at the pale, faceless man that had previously been Víga-Barói.

As the daemon's new scribe raised its twitching limbs and began to write,

Schüler slammed the gate behind him and rushed back across the garden, trembling with renewed hope.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The creatures attacked with astonishing speed. Their white, lissom bodies flew across the room with such grace that it seemed more like dance than violence. There was no trace of clothing to hide their androgynous flesh and as they approached Sväla she saw that their eyes were as black as coal.

The Norscans raised their weapons to defend themselves, but the creatures sliced into them with a gleeful scream, pinioning some to the floor with their serrated claws and garrotting others with their segmented tails.

Had there been more than two of the creatures, the fight would have been over very quickly. Even with such skewed odds, Sväla and the others found themselves locked in a desperate battle for survival. The jaunty, staccato music they had heard from the other side of the curtains continued as the combatants lurched across the drawing room, crashing into plush, upholstered furniture and stumbling over intricately embroidered silk rugs.

The Norscans fought in silence—hacking and jabbing at the creatures with grim determination. Gradually, they began to break through the nymphs' frenzied attacks and land blows on them, but the creatures gave no sign of retreating; in fact, they seemed to relish the pain—gasping lasciviously at each new scar and flicking long, black tongues across their wounds.

As the struggle continued the tempo of the music increased, keeping time with the lunges and thrusts of the warriors, giving the fight the appearance of a strange, bloodthirsty performance. To the Norscans it seemed that the harder they fought, the more pleasure it gave their foes and as the minutes passed, more

of them dropped to the ground, their necks severed by snapping, crab-like claws.

Along with the music and the grunting of the warriors, another sound emerged.

Sväla pulled back from the fight for a second and allowed herself a quick glimpse back at the curtain.

Ungaur the Blessed was standing a few feet away, with his staff raised and his head jolting from side to side. His face was locked in a grimace and it was clear he was in agony. Blood was running from between his fingers and trailing down the gnarled length of wood, washing over the bones and fetishes and pooling at his feet. As he held the staff aloft, a stream of guttural words was tumbling from between the jaws of the wolf's head, and the shaman's massive, fur-clad frame was trembling with exertion. His words were brittle with pain and his knuckles were white from gripping the staff so tightly.

Sväla stepped towards him, but before she could speak Ungaur uttered a final, hoarse syllable and levelled his staff at the struggling figures.

Viscous crimson light poured from the staff and washed over the Norscans. As the shaman's energy rippled through them, the warriors' blows tripled in fury, until their weapons were rising and falling with incredible speed.

The nymphs could not survive such an onslaught and finally slumped back against the wall, drenched in blood and sobbing with ecstasy as the Norscans hacked their bodies apart.

Once they were sure the creatures were dead, the Norscans backed away from their gory handiwork, nodding at each other in satisfaction, and looking at their throbbing muscles in shock.

Then Sväla saw Ungaur topple backwards, slamming onto the polished floorboards like a felled tree.

She rushed to his side and lifted his head.

At first the shaman's eyes were unable to focus, then he saw who was holding him and revealed his black spines in a grin. "I have to admit, Sväla," he gasped, "I was saving all my strength to kill you. There was something about those things, though..." he grimaced as he looked over at the two crumpled corpses. "They seemed equally worthy targets."

Sväla shook her head, stunned. "If you had such power in you, all this time, why have you let me live? I know you wish me dead."

The shaman narrowed his eyes and pulled her closer, blind to the other figures crowding round them. "You're not the only one who wants this tribe to survive, Sväla." He coughed, filling his beard with blood. "There's no way back now. I don't need your visions to see that. Our only hope is you, and your

obsession with Sigvald.” He gripped her shoulder briefly, as the colour drained from his face. “I only pray you’re right, witch.”

Sväla laid the shaman’s head gently back down on the floor. “I’m right,” she replied, but her heart was pounding as she looked up at the others.

They were all drenched in blood and panting heavily. She realised that only Svärd, Valdür and three others were left standing. She looked past their anguished faces and saw that some of those who had fallen were still alive, clutching at ragged holes in their throats and gurgling horribly.

“Quick,” she snapped, rushing to the nearest one and hammering her knife into his chest. “End their suffering.”

The others followed suit and for a few seconds the room became a grim abattoir as the Norscans butchered their own kin.

Sväla stood up with a look of fierce determination on her face. “None of this will be in vain,” she said, glaring at the survivors. Then she looked around and saw another curtain on the far side of the room. “We must keep looking. If the palace is still inhabited, Sigvald may yet be here.”

Valdür shook his head and waved at the groaning shaman and the mounds of corpses. “We’re done, Sväla,” he muttered, his words full of bitterness. “If two of Sigvald’s servants can do this to us, how could we ever hope to kill the prince himself?”

“Kill Sigvald?” came a voice from the shadows.

Sväla whirled around with her knife raised. There was a young girl sitting at the far end of the drawing room, half hidden in shadow. She was curled up, cat-like, on a plump, damask settee, wearing nothing but a few straps of leather and a long, amethyst necklace. Sväla frowned and stepped closer. The girl was unusually beautiful, but, more than that, she was strangely familiar. “I know you,” she whispered, edging closer with her knife raised.

“Wait,” snapped Valdür, hurrying to Sväla’s side. “She might be—” As the old warrior saw the girl’s face he stumbled to a halt and left his sentence unfinished.

Sväla looked back at him and saw that he had shifted his gaze to the rug-strewn floor and seemed to be blushing.

As the others approached to look at the girl, they began to act just as strangely—lowering their weapons and covering their mouths in shock.

Sväla looked back at the girl, trying desperately to place her. Her face was freckled, fair and surrounded by a tumbling mass of dark, glossy locks; and as the Norscans approached, she pursed her lips in a sullen, blood-red pout.

“Who are you?” demanded Sväla, jabbing her knife in the girl’s direction.

“Who am I? I’m Freydís, Princess of the Gilded Palace. Who are *you* might be a more pertinent question. Who are you to come in here and murder my only distraction?” The girl waved to an object on the table in front of her. “What use is a tune without a dancer?”

Sväla saw that she was indicating a small, skeletal creature. It looked like the desiccated remains of a particularly ugly, spiny lizard, which was busily hammering away at its own ribs with a silver hammer, like some kind of rotting glockenspiel. Sväla realised that this was the source of the repetitive tune that had been rattling around her head since she had first entered the room.

She strode towards the thing and swept it onto the floor with a curse.

The creature shrieked and scampered from view, leaving a trail of spindly bones as it went.

“We’re Sigvald’s doom,” cried Sväla. “We’re the progeny of his depraved lusts, come to wash away our shame with his blood.” Sväla’s face flushed with colour and her lips trembled with rage. “We are the Fallen, Freydís. The emissaries of a cursed nation, come for our errant son.” She stepped closer to the girl and glared at her. “We are Sigvald’s executioners.”

The girl smirked and rose to her feet with a sinuous grace. “And just how do you intend to execute my husband, peasant?”

Sväla’s cheeks flushed even darker. “This is his wife!” she cried, turning to the others. “Seize her!”

The men stared back at Sväla as though she were a stranger.

The young girl laughed as she stepped past Sväla to Valdür’s side.

The old man dropped to his knees and clasped the hand she offered him, planting a fervent kiss on her pale skin. At the sight of this, the others rushed forwards and did the same, prostrating themselves before Freydís’ beauty.

“You might find him difficult to kill,” whispered the girl, running her fingers across Valdür’s entranced face.

“I’ll find a way,” snapped Sväla, trying to hide her fear at the men’s bizarre behaviour.

“Oh, there is a way,” replied Freydís, walking casually across the room towards another set of curtains.

Sväla rushed after her with her knife raised. “Where are you—?” she began.

Before she could finish her question, Sväla found herself being dragged back by a pair of iron-hard arms. “What’s this?” she gasped, feeling a spearhead pressing under her chin.

“Leave her be,” muttered Valdür in her ear.

“What are you doing?” she howled, unable to believe that her old friend

would betray her in such a way.

Valdür shoved Sväla to the floor and pointed his spear at her. “Don’t harm this girl,” he growled, his whole body shaking with rage. “She’s innocent.”

Freydís laughed as she stepped into the next room. “Oh yes, quite innocent.”

“I won’t touch her, Valdür,” gasped Sväla, climbing carefully to her feet. She sheathed her knife and raised her hands in a placatory gesture.

Valdür watched her closely as they followed the princess into the next room.

Sväla shook her head as she faced yet another bizarre assault on her senses. The room they had entered was like the lair of some crazed taxidermist. Hissing oil lamps revealed rows of skeletal remains lining both sides of the small room. None of the corpses resembled any creature she had ever seen before. They were all vaguely reptilian, with long, lizard-like skulls and spiny, serpentine tails but all of them had been mangled into unnatural shapes, with arching, wasted wings and upright, humanoid postures. Behind the skeletons were floor-to-ceiling shelves, crammed with hundreds of spherical glass jars, each holding smaller lizards suspended in a cloudy solution.

It was not so much the sight of the rotting, waxen creatures that unnerved Sväla, it was the sound they were making. The body cavities of the standing ones had been strung with piano wire, and as they watched Sväla’s approach they jerked into motion, plucking at the strings and creating a chorus of menacing arpeggios. As the larger figures played, the ones in the jars began to twitch, opening and closing their mouths in unison and producing a gurgled, liquid refrain.

The princess noticed Sväla’s dismay and smiled, throwing her arm around one of the spindly shapes. “A wedding gift,” she sighed, before hurrying on through the next pair of curtains.

As the men hurried after the princess, Sväla stumbled to a halt and looked back the way she had come. “Ungaur,” she muttered, with a rush of guilt. Indecision gripped her for a second, then she rushed back into the drawing room.

The first thing she noticed was an awful smell of rotting food. She looked around in confusion but could not see where the appalling stench was coming from. The corpses of the fallen Norscans and the two nymphs could not have decayed so quickly and although there were plates of half-eaten food scattered around the room, they could not account for such a dreadful stink.

Then Sväla noticed something else strange.

Ungaur had vanished.

She scoured the room for the shaman, but could see no sign of him. She dashed over to the spot where he had fallen and noticed that there was a smear of blood across the polished floorboards, leading back towards the dining room.

“Ungaur?” she cried, stepping through the next set of curtains and looking down the length of the long table. The charred head was still on the plate grinning back at her, but there was no sign of the shaman. She cursed under her breath. “I’ll be back soon,” she cried, without much hope of being heard, then hurried back through the rooms after the princess.

Sväla clamped her hands over her ears as she raced through the taxidermy room and pulled aside the next set of curtains.

She found herself back outside the palace and gasped at the bitter cold. She shielded her face as she stumbled out into the storm, blind for a few moments as the snow lashed into her eyes. Then she saw a group of figures, huddled together by an ornate metal railing and she realised she was standing on a broad balcony, hung out over the moonlit wastes.

“We’re over here, my angry little savage,” called the princess, waving Sväla over to the railings.

Sväla pulled her furs over her head and struggled through the icy weather. As she reached the group of figures, she saw that one of her men was sprawled at the feet of the princess, with blood pooling from a deep gash in his throat.

She drew her knife and looked at Valdür and the others in confusion. They were standing in a semicircle next to the princess, whispering urgently to each other.

“What happened?” she cried, crouching in the snow to examine the fallen man. He was dead. “Valdür? Svärd? What happened?”

The men ignored her and kept whispering, but Sväla noticed that Valdür’s javelin was dripping with fresh blood. She looked back at the princess and saw that she had wrapped her pale skin in a long coat of glossy black sable and was watching her closely from within the deep hood.

“They will do that for a while,” the princess explained, nodding at the men. “Then one of them will kill the others,” she shrugged, “so he can keep me all to himself.”

“You said there was a way to kill Sigvald.” growled Sväla through clenched teeth. “What is it?”

The princess ignored her question and pointed up at the palace. “Have you ever seen anything like this?” she asked.

Sväla turned and looked up at the tower looming over them. It was hundreds of feet tall, gilded from top to bottom and built in the semblance of a

willowy, female figure. Far above, in the snow-laden clouds, Sväla could just make out the figure's elegant hands, cradling a glittering, winged heart.

"They just call it the Sixth Tower now," explained the princess, stepping to Sväla's side, "but when Sigvald built it, he named it after me." She pointed up at the distant face that crowned the tower. "Do you recognise me?"

Sväla nodded vaguely, and placed a hand on her knife, deciding to waste no more time on the vile woman. But before she could even draw the blade she noticed that all the men had stopped whispering and were staring at her. She sighed and moved her hand away from the weapon. "Yes, yes," she said. "I understand. The tower is you." She turned to face the princess. "What do you want?"

"What do I want? I seem to remember that *you* blundered into my chambers, peasant. I seem to remember that you butchered my servants and hurled abuse at me."

Sväla continued gritting her teeth but could think of nothing to say. To kill the woman was clearly impossible, at least while the men were watching, but she could not simply abandon Svärd and Valdür.

Freydís stepped closer. "Sigvald no longer builds towers for me, peasant, do you understand? He can barely remember my name. His love has burned itself out, just as surely as all his other passions." Her voice grew shrill as she pointed at the billowing curtains. "He's left me here to rot, along with all his other toys." She grabbed Sväla's shoulders and pulled her close. "Can you even understand what that means? He's betrayed me!" she screamed, spitting into Sväla's face and shoving her back and forth. "I gave him everything. I sacrificed my own family to assuage his wretched lust. And now the devious, inconstant, lying bastard has left me to die."

Sväla shrugged herself free of the princess' grip and backed away, shaking her head in confusion.

"I want you to take me with you!" cried Freydís, rushing after Sväla. "That's what I want! Do you understand? I know *exactly* how you can kill him and I'll tell you everything—all his shameful little weaknesses." Her lips pulled back into a dreadful snarl. "Just take me with you, peasant, let me be by your side when you gouge his rotten heart out."

Sväla's head reeled. "You want to kill your husband?"

The princess nodded eagerly and closed her eyes for a second, savouring the idea.

Sväla looked over at the bickering men. Their voices were now raised and Svärd was jabbing his finger into the chest of one of the older men. "If I agreed

to take you with me, can you bring them to their senses? I can't take you anywhere without the help of my people."

Freydís nodded again and swapped her snarl for a girlish grin. "Easily done," she said, reaching into her furs and drawing out a length of silk. She stretched the material across her face and knotted it behind her head, obscuring her delicate features. Then she stepped over to the men and spoke to each of them separately, gently stroking their faces as she whispered in their ears.

The men's expressions softened as the veiled princess spoke to them, and as they shuffled back towards Sväla, they were all smiling enigmatically, as though in possession of a wonderful secret.

"Are you with me now?" said Sväla, unable to hide the disgust in her voice.

The men nodded in reply, but only Valdür spoke. "If we are to rescue the princess, we must find the others. We're too few to guard her properly."

"Rescue?" gasped Sväla, looking over at Freydís.

The princess laughed.

Seeing the anger welling in Valdür's face, Sväla raised her hands and nodded. "Yes, you're right. We must return to the main gate. The princess is going to lead us to Sigvald." She frowned at Freydís. "We'll need food before we can—"

Sväla's words were cut short as one of the Norscans howled in pain.

As the man flew back into the shadows, with a tentacle wrapped around his head, Sväla recognised the same stink of rotting food that she had noticed earlier.

Freydís cursed and backed away.

The Norscans crouched low with their weapons drawn and peered into the whirling snow.

They all heard the sound of crunching bone and a muffled, terrified scream, then there was silence.

"What was that?" hissed Sväla.

Freydís shook her head in disgust. "One of Sigvald's lackeys. My husband wanted to be sure I—"

Another tentacle flew out of the darkness, this time from another direction. It lashed itself around Sväla's neck and jolted him forwards.

This time, Valdür was ready. He jammed his spear into the pale, undulating flesh and pinned it to the floor.

The others followed suit, skewering the twitching limb with their weapons.

Sväla grasped the feeler with both hands and heaved it towards him.

A bellowing roar filled the night as a massive, bulbous head swung towards them through the snow.

The Norscans gasped in horror at the sight of Ansgallür the Famished. His globular, gelatinous eyes were rolling in pain as he unfurled dozens more of the tentacles from beneath his chin, and his gaping mouth blasted them with the smell of rotten meat as he continued to howl.

The Norscans cried out in disgust as cold, flabby limbs wrapped around their necks and torsos.

There was a loud *crack* and one of them slumped in the monster's grip, his neck broken.

Now there were only three of the men left, each of them struggling to turn their long spears towards the limbs at their throats.

Sväla had no such problem. She rammed her iron knife down into the rubbery muscle, sending a torrent of warm blood up over her chin. The limb jerked back and, rather than holding it in place, Sväla allowed it to recoil, taking her with it, so that she hurtled towards the monstrous head. As she neared the bulbous shape, she launched herself at one of its eyes, jamming her blade straight into the saucer-sized pupil. Blood and fluid poured over her as she slapped against the ruptured eyeball.

The monster lurched back towards the railing with another furious cry, dragging its victims with it and hurling one of them from the balcony, sending him spinning down towards the snowy wastes below.

Sväla struggled desperately to free herself and see who had fallen. Only two of the men remained and it was impossible to see which. "Svärd?" she screamed. "Valdür?" Her stomach lurched as the howling monster lifted her up into the air and drew back its arm to throw her out into the storm.

Then the limb around her waist stiffened, before dropping her back down onto the icy flagstones.

As the storm screamed around them, the monster's limbs thrashed wildly through the snow. It was hard to see exactly what was happening, but Sväla had the distinct impression that the head had rolled onto its side.

She wrenched herself free of the tentacle and staggered back from the railing, raising her hand to her eyes in an attempt to see more clearly.

Svärd and Valdür were still alive. The two men were still struggling desperately to free themselves from Ansgallür's grip.

The monster had slumped back against the railing and there was blood pouring from its gaping mouth as well as its eye.

There was a third figure standing in front of the head and, with a jolt of shock, Sväla realised it was Freydís. She had grabbed a spear from the floor and thrust it into her jailer's mouth.

As Ansgallür leant back from the princess, gargling blood, the railing buckled and screeched beneath his weight.

“Send him off the edge!” cried Sväla, charging forwards and slamming her shoulder into Ansgallür’s vast face.

Valdür and Svärd followed her lead and shoved the head back against the railing so that the metal shrieked and bowed out from the stone, causing the head to slump back even further.

Freydís wrenched the spear from Ansgallür’s mouth and grinned triumphantly, blowing her guardian a farewell kiss as she planted her foot in his face and shoved.

With a final grinding moan, the metal collapsed and Ansgallür tumbled from view.

Sväla let out a victorious howl as the face span away from her into the storm. Then she noticed a smaller figure, trapped in Ansgallür’s grip as he fell: Valdür the Old, still straining to free himself as he plummeted to his death.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Clouds flickered, pulsing with mercurial light as they gave birth to a single, drifting shadow. Far above the tumbling peaks hung a landscape so strange that no mortal eyes could ever have perceived it. The shadow, however, lifted its gaze to the dreamlike canopy of sounds and shapes, pausing for a moment to admire the view, then it continued on its way.

After a while, the shadow became aware that it had form and shape. Vague, ethereal legs were powering it across the clouds and a jumble of half-formed memories filled its head.

As the lights flashed and failed, they wrenched the shadow in and out of being. In the moments of pitch darkness, the shadow felt itself dissipate and die, only to be reborn in the next lurid burst of crimson or green.

The shadow travelled on for what seemed like an eternity, climbing and rippling across the surface of the clouds with an inexplicable sense of purpose. Over time, the flashes of light became more sporadic, and the shadow felt itself slipping back into mindlessness.

Just as it thought it might be consumed by oblivion, the shadow spotted something unusual on the next bank of clouds: a small, circular structure, built from mud and straw and topped with a cone-shaped thatch.

The shadow paused, haunted by a memory that cowered at the back of its thoughts, unwilling to fully reveal itself. Then it hurried towards the building, determined not to drift back into nothingness—at least not yet.

As the shadow washed over the walls of the crudely built hovel, it heard a

piercing shriek. A sudden urgency gripped the silhouette as it slid beneath the gnarled, wooden door.

The tiny building was filled with noise and movement. A woman lay sprawled on a bed of furs gasping for breath, pale and trembling with exhaustion. Her sweaty hair was plastered across her face as she looked up at the tribesman standing over her.

“A boy,” grunted the man, peering at the bloody, struggling shape in his hands.

The shadow recoiled in shock at the sight of the man’s face.

The tribesman was shockingly familiar. His brutal, shaven head was crowned with a short Mohican and pierced with claws and bones, and his powerful, muscular body was naked, apart from a filthy loincloth and a crudely hammered piece of iron over his right shoulder. The shadow rippled over his face, tracing the harsh lines and the scarred flesh in an effort to place him.

As the shadow studied the scene, it felt a familiar emotion: an unpleasant, gnawing pain deep in its soul. The sensation grew to such an unbearable degree that the shadow hurried on, slipping through a second door at the back of the hut.

Rather than returning to empty clouds, as it expected, the shadow found itself washing across mounds of corpses. A sea of fallen tribesmen was spread out before it, covering the horizon with broken limbs, splintered shields and pale, grimacing death masks. As the shadow drifted across the ruptured flesh, it recognised some of the men’s faces, but there was movement and noise on the horizon and it did not pause to investigate.

Not all of the tribesmen were dead. As the shadow hurried on, it picked out a crowd of warriors, howling victoriously and thrusting their javelins at the shifting landscape above. At the heart of the group was the man with the Mohican. The shadow looked back towards the hut in confusion and saw that it had vanished. Turning back to the crowd of cheering men, it saw that the tribesmen had lifted their chieftain up onto their shoulders and were dancing back and forth with him.

The man laughed and lay back across their hands, closing his eyes and revelling in their praise. His body was covered with fresh wounds and bruises, but he seemed oblivious to anything other than his victory. After a few minutes he demanded they put him down and waved to a small figure, trailing after the others.

“My son!” he cried, eliciting a fresh cheer from his men. “Have you ever seen such a fighter?”

The shadow rippled over the slender youth, to examine him more closely.

The boy was only ten or eleven at most but his wiry frame was knotted with muscle, and already carried several impressive scars. His blue eyes flashed with pride as he lifted his bloody javelin in reply, laughing along with the others and shaking his long mane of blond hair, as the men lifted him up onto their shoulders and hurled him into the air.

The shadow flinched. Something about the chieftain's praise knifed into it. As it saw the delight in the man's face, it felt the unbearable gnawing pain again and slipped away across the clouds.

The shadow reached another battleground and then another. A whole series of bloody victories was played out, each one culminating in a victory for the chieftain and his son. Each time, the boy received more credit for the tribe's success. As his muscles grew thicker and his shoulders broader, the tribesmen howled his name out, studying the corpses at his feet with awe. They fell to their knees in front of him and pounded their fists on their gore-splattered chests.

The shadow watched with an awful sense of foreboding as the youth's fame grew. At the end of each battle, more of the tribe's fervour was reserved for the youth, and less was directed at the quickly ageing chieftain. The shadow watched from beneath a pile of broken shields and saw the older warrior's expression change from pride to concern. As the grinning youth waved his grisly trophies at the baying men, a spark flared in his father's eyes: a spark of hard, bitter fear.

The shadow's inexplicable pain continued to grow as it hurried on through dozens more of the victory celebrations, watching with dread as the youth grew more and more boastful—crowing over his victories and mocking their foes. As his confidence grew, so did his blood lust. The boy's battle frenzy continued even after the enemy were defeated, causing the other tribesmen to eye each other warily as their hero sank his teeth into the flesh of the fallen and grinned back at them with blood pouring down his broad chest.

Finally, the shadow reached a battle that was far from won. Tightly packed rows of tribesmen were still crushed together, howling curses and jabbing their spears. Trapped in the heart of the enemy ranks was the golden-haired youth. Hubris had led him far ahead of the others and left him surrounded by the enemy. The pile of corpses that lay sprawled around him was testament to his incredible skill, but the odds were insurmountable. The boy lunged and kicked with growing desperation as the enemy pressed closer and, for the first time, the shadow saw fear in the youth's eyes.

Just as it looked as though the boy was about to vanish beneath a wall of enemy spears, another figure entered the fray: a second youth, with a dark,

brooding face and long, rangy limbs.

The taller boy crashed through the wall of enemy spears and sliced his axe across the necks of their wielders, flooring three men with one powerful swipe.

At the sight of his rescuer, the blue-eyed warrior cried out in recognition and relief, rushing to his side with renewed vigour and taking advantage of the confusion to down another three men.

The two boys fought back-to-back with a ferocity that astounded their foes. Death was inevitable, but they seemed beyond caring. Their faces were locked in the same maniacal grins.

After almost half an hour of brutal fighting, the crowds of enemy tribesmen had still failed to bring either of the boys to their knees.

Finally, a hulking shape approached the press of bodies and held up a long, two-handed sword, bellowing at his men to lower their weapons. The Norscans cowered at the sight of him; muttering prayers under their breath and clearing a path so that he could saunter towards the two boys. He was clearly a great champion. At nearly seven feet tall, his huge frame was clad in a suit of intricately engraved white metal. The gleaming, ribbed armour had been hammered into a mass of jagged, serrated spikes and decorated with images of intertwined lilies. His face was hidden inside a strange, tall helmet that curved up like an ivory leaf from his broad shoulders. As his voice rang out, it was as metallic and inhuman as a tolling bell.

“Stand back,” he boomed, signalling for his men to lower their weapons.

As a wide circle formed around them, the two exhausted boys stared up at the white knight with a mixture of defiance and awe. An unholy rune was emblazoned across the centre of his cuirass, framed by the spirals of lily petals. It was a circle enclosed by a semi circle, with a line pointing out from its centre. The sigil glowed as though it had just emerged from a blacksmith’s furnace: vivid, molten and rippling with waves of emerald heat. As the knight stepped closer, the baleful light washed over the boys’ sweat-drenched faces, revealing the terror in their eyes.

The warrior studied them in silence for a few seconds, leaning on a lustrous, alabaster greatsword. He looked quite at ease, despite the carnage that surrounded them. “What are your names?” he asked eventually, with a note of humour in his voice.

“I’m Sigvald,” cried the blond-haired youth. He raised his chin defiantly as he spoke, but his voice was shrill with fear. “And this,”—he waved at his companion—“is Oddrún.”

The knight gave them a small bow in reply. “I’m honoured to meet you.”

He waved at the mounds of corpses that surrounded them. "Such bravery does not go unnoticed. Your deeds have been watched from afar."

The champion signalled for his men to head back into the main crush of battle and leave the boys behind. Then he removed his helmet to reveal a face so long and strange that it looked barely human. His smooth, hairless chin tapered to an elongated point and his small features were hidden in shadow beneath a tall expanse of forehead. The overall effect was that his head seemed to have been pinched at both ends and stretched almost beyond recognition. "I do not think that this is your day to die," he rumbled. As he studied them, the knight tapped the pulsing icon on his breastplate. "I'm Einvarr. Look for my sign, masters Sigvald and Oddrún." Then he turned on his heel and strode after the receding warriors.

As their enemies withdrew, the two boys found themselves alone with the corpses and finally collapsed to their knees. They looked at each other's dazed, blood-splattered face and laughed in disbelief. Neither of them had expected to survive.

"You saved me," said Sigvald, grasping his friend's shoulder.

"We saved each other," replied Oddrún.

After a few moments, Sigvald took a knife from his belt, ran the edge across his palm and held out his hand.

Oddrún narrowed his eyes, looking from the bloody wound to Sigvald's face and considering what was being offered. Then he nodded and grabbed the knife. He drew a crimson line across his skin and grasped Sigvald's hand in his own.

"I will never desert you," cried Sigvald, tightening his grip until blood welled up between their fingers.

Oddrún didn't reply for a second, as he watched the receding white figure. Then he turned back to his friend with an earnest frown. "Nor I you, Sigvald."

The shadow washed over the faces of the two young Norscans, then shrank away, hiding itself in the crowds of warriors, filled with pain and confusion. As it rushed across the clouds, more images assailed it. Every billowing valley revealed another glimpse of Sigvald's youth. Rather than battles though, he was now immersed in a world of dark rites and secret gatherings. Painful shards of memory needled the shadow as it followed his ruinous journey. In one scene, Sigvald's father had his son by the throat and was waving furiously at a bunch of mutilated corpses. Each body had been beheaded and scarred with the same symbol as Einvarr's armour. "You're an abomination!" the chieftain shouted, before throwing the youth to the ground in disgust and storming away.

Later, the shadow watched a slightly older Sigvald climb to the mountain fastness of the knight in the white armour. Once there, along with the lanky youth, Oddrún, he swore fealty to Einvarr, who, in time, introduced them to his patron: a placid-faced, androgynous youth with luminous pale skin and two small, black horns sprouting from beneath its white hood. The shadow flickered nervously back and forth across a tiny, candlelit chapel as the daemon ensnared its young victims. The two boys presented themselves willingly and begged for aid against the wrath of Sigvald's father, explaining that he had banished them from the tribe. The scene played itself out in horrible, vivid detail and the shadow remembered everything as though it had happened only days ago. The young Sigvald had a ferocious hunger in his eyes as the daemon promised him a life of eternal power and ecstasy, in exchange for a small token of fealty: a crude, bronze torque that snaked around the bicep of his right arm. Sigvald agreed readily and handed over the metal band with a grin.

The shadow cried out in alarm, suddenly terrified for the fresh-faced youth. "Go home!" it cried, throwing its formless arms out and trying to seize the torque. "Don't give yourself away!" But the shadow slipped, unnoticed through the darkness.

The young Sigvald carried on grinning as Belus Pül slipped the torque on its arm and triumphantly described the event to a pallid, spider-like shape, twitching in the gloom a few feet away.

Then the daemon turned to the second youth and nodded to a brooch on his fur cloak: a lump of iron, cast in the shape of a wolf's head.

The lanky youth looked at Sigvald, who was nodding eagerly, and removed the brooch from his cloak. But then, as the candlelight revealed the huddled mass of limbs in the corner more clearly, he recoiled and snatched the trinket back, hiding it in his cloak.

"They're monsters," he cried, backing away to the exit and levelling a finger at the slender, robed figure. "I won't give myself to such a thing. I won't!"

The daemon reeled back against a stone altar, raising a hand to its mouth in shock and silently repeating the word "monster".

The shadow looked around in dismay as the candles gutted and failed, plunging the chapel into darkness. A terrible screaming filled the room and stones began to clatter to the ground as the whole structure began to shake.

The shadow felt itself dissipating into the blackness as the boys scrambled past, crying to each other in fear and trying desperately to find a way out. In its last moments of sentience, it heard an unearthly voice directing a bitter, hate-

filled curse at Oddrún. “Monster!” it cried, as the building collapsed.

With a flash of silent lightning, the shadow rippled back into view. The chapel had vanished, along with the daemon and the two young men. All that remained was the tumbling, mountainous clouds, pulsing with unholy light as the world rushed by overhead. The shadow cursed and whined as the remaining pieces of its life fell into place. The daemon had been true to its word. Sigvald had been given countless lifetimes in which to satisfy his every craven desire. But within just a few short years, he had begun to see the cruel irony of the pact. *Nothing* satisfied him. As his last traces of humanity slipped away, he realised that no pleasure could satiate his hunger. He roamed the Wastes, seeking the perfect, most extreme form of everything: wine, music, pain, sex, grief, remorse, inebriation, victory; but once he attained them, they crumbled like ash in his hands. Something better was always taunting him from just beyond the horizon. The daemon’s malice had driven him ever onwards, to stranger, darker places, but always to no avail. “Narrerback,” he whispered, looking down at his hand and imagining a faded scar. “What have I done to us?”

Sigvald’s shadow lay back across the clouds and wept, allowing its insubstantial limbs to slowly extend towards the horizon. Then, after a few minutes, it felt a strange sensation. Its hazy outline began to move of its own accord, shrinking towards a small figure that had appeared in the distance.

The shadow groaned, unwilling to endure another harrowing vision. Then it raised its head and studied the glimmer of gold it was racing towards. It was a knight, striding across the clouds, clad in flawless gilt armour. The knight was grinning in recognition.

“It’s me,” gasped the shadow, as it saw that its own shape was carved from the blazing sunlight, pouring around the smiling knight.

As the knight approached, the shadow shortened until its face was just a few feet away from its owner.

“You look so sad,” said the knight, coming to halt with a concerned expression on his face. “Has life really been such a disappointment?”

“Are you me?” asked the shadow, studying the man’s pale, handsome features.

The knight threw back his mane of blond hair and laughed. “I’m whatever you most want to see, Sigvald.”

The shadow felt a rush of fear and struggled to free itself. It was no use, its form was locked to the prince’s feet, however fiercely it lurched and rolled. “Let me go!” it cried.

The knight frowned. “Is that what you desire?” He looked up at the shapes fluxing overhead. Oceans became deserts and spiralled into vast, billowing faces before dissolving into other, unknowable forms. “Would you abandon the world, then, Sigvald? Could you really abjure all this fathomless beauty?”

The shadow grew still, wondering if the question might be more than hypothetical. “My lord,” it moaned, “can you offer me such a thing? I wish it more than anything. I’ve seen my life from beginning to end. Every minute has been fruitless.”

The knight raised his eyebrows. “Fruitless?” He drew a gleaming rapier and held it up into the sunlight, so that a line of silver glimmered along the blade. “Yes, Sigvald, I can offer you such a thing. If it’s what you truly desire, I can grant you that boon. You’ve been a loyal servant and I’m not a heartless brute.” He stooped down until his face was a few inches away from the shadow’s. “But is that *truly* what you want?”

The shadow felt a flash of hope at the knight’s words and nodded eagerly. As the knight moved closer, though, the shadow was surprised by its own reply. “Perfect,” it muttered. This close up, the knight’s flawless beauty was breathtaking. “I’m so perfect,” said the shadow, unable to imagine anything more wonderful than the smiling face hanging over it—the smiling face that it knew was its own.

The prince placed the edge of his rapier where the shadow met his feet. “Oblivion can be yours, Sigvald. Sweet, eternal nothingness.”

“Wait,” gasped the shadow, tracing its fingers over the prince’s face. “Will I look... Well... Will I be the same?”

The prince continued smiling as he shook his head.

Sigvald’s shadow felt a pain greater than anything it had endured so far. “I’ll never see my face again?”

“You will dissolve on the wind, Sigvald, like the remains of a funeral pyre.”

“Wait,” repeated the shadow huddling closer to the prince’s feet. “I’m not sure.”

The prince shook his head in confusion. “I thought you were weary of your life?”

“I was confused,” gasped the shadow, pawing at its owner. “I saw my family. I thought there could be a way back. I thought death might be an escape from this burden.” The shadow shook its head fiercely. “But I don’t want to escape from myself, even if it’s the only way.”

“How can you talk of burdens?” asked the prince, replacing his smile with a confused frown. “Countless, wretched millions toil in obscurity and die, daily,

unknown; nothing but fleas on the carcass of history, while *you*, Sigvald, have been allotted a place in the greatest of all games. *You* have a chance to burn a light through all that miserable dross. Can't you see? All the universe's infinite potential is contained within your tiny, blessed frame."

As the prince spoke, his shadow felt its mind flooding with images. They were the same scenes of lustful pursuit it had recalled earlier, but now, rather than frustrating, they seemed heroic. Every base act was a gesture of defiance: an insolent fist raised against the morbid tedium of the universe, a rallying cry to every imaginative soul who would listen. The shadow began to tremble with emotion. "Yes," it whispered, awestruck by its own importance. "I *do* see. I'm an example. An emblem of hope."

The smile returned to the prince's face. "Then will you try again, Sigvald? Will you pit yourself against a mindless cosmos? Will you rejoin the Great Game?"

The shadow reared up with an exultant cry. "Yes! And I will never again—"

Before the shadow could finish its reply, the prince thrust his rapier into the shadow's heart, filling it with incredible, electrifying pain.

Sigvald stepped from the Lucid Gate and looked down the long black road. He paid no attention to the hawthorn bushes or the discarded casket as he stared into the whirling storm. His armour flashed and glittered in the moonlight and his long, blond hair trailed around his face like a halo. He closed his eyes and held up his hands, delighted by the sensation of snowflakes settling on his upturned palms. Then he looked down at his perfect, unmarked armour with a sigh of pleasure. All trace of damage had vanished. The etched, golden plates gleamed as brightly as the day they were forged; brighter, even. Then he held up his mirrored, circular shield and gazed lovingly at his reflection. His skin was flawless once more.

As he marched south, he grasped the hilt of a rapier, buried deep in the centre of his ornate chest armour. He wrenched the blade from his body with a sigh of pleasure and a scrape of grinding metal. Blinding light leaked briefly from the wound, before the breastplate smoothed itself seamlessly over the hole. Then Sigvald held the weapon up to the starless sky and grinned, admiring the intricate, lacy metalwork.

His grin broadened as he looked down and saw that he was walking several inches above the ground.

As Sigvald broke into a run, the ground rippled away from him, heaving and rolling like waves before the prow of a great ship.

His grin became a long, joyous laugh.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Baron Schüler ran a scarred hand over his face, wiping some of the frozen blood from his beard and massaging his ridged brow. His skeletal body looked as though it was only kept upright by his armour but, as he led the remnants of Sigvald's army back towards the Gilded Palace, there was a wolfish hunger in his eyes. He turned to a small figure sitting on the horse next to him. "What is that?" he asked, nodding at a broad, dark expanse that was spreading across the horizon. The palace had been in sight for hours, but the dark stain beneath it had only just appeared.

Énka threw back his hood, allowing the moonlight to glitter over his long, piscine face. He stood up in his saddle, straining to see over the horse's mane and tilted his head on one side, fixing one of his round, glassy eyes on the horizon. "Too far," he replied, sitting back down and rummaging in his robes for something. He dropped several, twitching shapes onto the snow before nodding in satisfaction and holding up a blind, featherless bird. The fidgeting creature was covered in dark, inky sigils that spiralled out from the sockets where its eyes should have been. Muttering under his breath, the sorcerer had another rummage in his robes and drew out a small jar of black paste. He unscrewed the lid and plunged in his finger. The paste sizzled and steamed on his scales as he withdrew some and smeared it across one of his eyeballs with an unpleasant squeaking sound. Then he dunked two fingers into the viscous paste and jabbed them into the bird's eye sockets. "This should help," he said, leaning back in his saddle and hurling the bird into the air. The pink, dimpled ball span through the snowflakes and landed a few feet away with a soft *plump*.

Énka looked at the new hole in the snow with obvious disappointment, then turned to the baron with an apologetic shrug.

Just as Schüler was about to ask for an explanation, the tiny bird emerged in a spray of white powder and fluttered off towards the Gilded Palace, weaving through the air in a series of wild loops and lurches.

Énka applauded and then covered the eye that wasn't smeared with black paste. He swayed from side to side in his saddle in time with the bird's erratic movements. Then he nodded eagerly. "Yes, I see. It's an army."

The baron's frown deepened and he raised a hand to his eyes, trying to see for himself. "An army? Are you sure? It looks more like some kind of lake."

The sorcerer shook his head. "It's an army. Well, if you could call it that." He wiped the paste from his eye and turned to face Schüler. "It's vast," he said, still shaking his head. "More like a whole country. There must be tens of thousands of people."

Schüler looked back at the ragged company of monsters and purple-clad knights behind them. Barely half of Sigvald's army had survived to make the return journey; less than five hundred of the Decadent Host remained. "Then we're doomed," he muttered. "Mord Huk will butcher us all and take the palace for himself." The colour drained from his gaunt face.

Oddrún was stood a few feet away, watching the exchange. He had remained silent and morose for the duration of their march south, refusing to answer any more questions, but at the sight of the army, he nodded in agreement. "It's the prince who Mord Huk wants. When he finds out that Sigvald is already dead, his anger will be tenfold. Killing us will be a small consolation, I imagine, but then the Gilded Palace will—"

"No," interrupted Énka, shaking his head. "You don't understand. It's not Mord Huk."

"What?" exclaimed the baron. "Who then?"

"They're Northmen," replied the sorcerer, fingering the last of the paste from his eye. "Thousands upon thousands of primitive Northmen, led by a small, weedy-looking woman." He shrugged. "She's covered in blue tattoos and is carrying a knife."

"Northmen?" grumbled Oddrún, loping through the snow towards Énka's horse. There was an unusual note of emotion in the giant's voice as he looked down at the sorcerer. "Norscans?"

"What else did you see?" demanded Schüler, barging past Oddrún and grabbing Énka's robes.

Énka's face remained expressionless as he strained to free himself from the

baron's grip. "There was someone else with them," he replied, wrenching himself free and sitting upright in his saddle. He took a second to smooth down his robes before continuing. "Riding next to the tattooed woman was Sigvald's wife."

The baron gasped and looked out at the distant line of figures. "They have the princess?" He leant forward in his saddle, peering through the snow, his voice filled with disgust and disbelief. "A tribe of stinking Northmen have Freydis?"

His weariness evaporated and he turned to the bizarre collection of creatures waiting behind him. Many of them were the soldiers he had led north, all those months earlier. Their bodies had been wrenched into vile new shapes, but their loyalty remained. As the baron turned towards them they lurched closer, eager for his command. He studied their distorted, nightmarish faces and felt a rush of excitement. The prince's surgeons and sorcerers had made monsters of them and, for the first time, the baron felt glad. Towering, bat-like wings rose up from their backs, along with a colourful forest of claws and tentacles. Beyond them were the pale-skinned nymphs, with their oily black eyes and their crab-like claws, and scattered through the whole army were the few remaining knights, clad in their etched, lilac armour and still clutching their battered swords.

"Norscans are only men," spat the baron. "They're no match for us. No match for the Decadent Host." He rose up in his saddle and lifted his sword to the sea of expectant faces. "Your home awaits you!" he cried. "The Gilded Palace! Where you can resume your work. Where you can explore every pleasure you can conceive of, in tribute to our fallen prince." He waved his sword at the advancing host. "But these..." His voice trembled with rage and for a moment he seemed too furious to continue. "These primitive men would stop us. They would take the Gilded Palace for their own!"

A chorus of bestial cries rippled through the army.

The baron nodded eagerly at his men. He was not sure that many of them even had the capacity to understand him, but his tone of indignation seemed enough.

"Not only that!" he cried, pulling frantically at his beard. "They have enslaved the Geld-Prince's widow!"

The monsters and knights howled even louder, lifting their segmented limbs over their heads and rattling their swords on their shields.

"We must cleanse this filth from Sigvald's kingdom!" cried Schüler, with his horse rearing beneath him. "We must reclaim our home!"



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Sväla came to a halt in the knee-deep snow and surveyed the army rushing towards her. “Doesn’t Sigvald see that he’s being surrounded?” she asked, turning to the armoured figure beside her.

“Perhaps not,” replied Princess Freydís, her face hidden behind the grille of an ornate helmet. “Perhaps he’s focussed all his attention on you, you lucky girl.”

Behind the two women stood the countless ranks of the Fallen and before them was the Decadent Host. Its lurid banners were unmistakable, as were the strange, manifold forms of Sigvald’s devotees: cherry-coloured bipedal mounts with elongated, tubular snouts, carrying a grotesque carnival of winged, pale-skinned nymphs and proud knights clad in baroque, lilac-coloured armour. The gaudy monsters were charging towards them through the snow, with their pennants trailing and their armour glinting in the moonlight; but they seemed utterly unaware that a third group was emerging from the storm.

A dark, crimson line was spreading across the horizon to the west, slowly encircling Sigvald’s troops from behind. It was clearly another army, but in contrast to the colour and din of the Decadent Host, these soldiers were sombre and quiet, spreading across the frozen wastes like a pool of blood.

“Mord Huk,” spat the princess, her voice filled with disdain.

“What?” asked Sväla.

“Mord Huk. He’s the dog-brained oaf who has stolen great tracts of our land,” explained Freydís, straightening her back and raising her chin. The

princess had donned a suit of close-fitting steel, and she made an impressive sight as she levelled a rapier at the approaching army. "This is the moron my husband abandoned me for. He has something Sigvald wants. Some worthless toy, I imagine, but desirable enough for the Geld-Prince to abandon me to my death."

"They're enemies?" asked Sväla hopefully, studying the two approaching lines of soldiers.

"Of course," laughed the princess. "These are the Shadowlands, my little savage. Enemies are all we have."

Sväla glared at the princess, and gripped her knife a little tighter. "Savage I may be, but I'll hold you to your word. Sigvald cannot be allowed to live."

Freydís nodded. "Don't worry yourself on that score, peasant. Just get me close to the fickle bastard. I'll make sure you know how to kill him." She looked out at the approaching army. "Or do the job myself."

Svärd emerged from the storm and nodded at his mother. As he addressed her, his eyes were gleaming with excitement. "Those with the best weapons are in the front lines, as you ordered." He could not refrain from smiling as he looked at the forest of javelins and axes. "Even now, our numbers are incredible. I've never seen anything like it. Nothing could stand against us and win."

As she looked at her naive young son, Sväla felt the absence of Valdür more than ever. With the leathery old warrior at her side, she would have felt a hundred times more confident of victory. Even the menacing presence of Ungaur the Blessed would have been a comfort as she faced this final challenge. Her mind was suddenly filled with the faces of all those who had been sacrificed to reach this point. Almost all of the chieftains and elders were gone. Only the mad old witch, Ürsula, was still alive, and Sväla had long since stopped listening to her interminable ramblings.

She drew her knife and gave her son a stern nod. There was no room for doubt. Victory was their only option. Even if it took the lives of every man, woman and child, they must kill Sigvald. The crusade could not be in vain.

"Give the signal," she said.

Svärd strode out in front of the army and turned to face them. Then he took a whalebone horn from his furs and let out a long, wavering note that echoed around the valleys and peaks.

All along the line, Norscans raised their own horns and answered the call, filling the storm with droning music.

Then, as one, the Fallen advanced.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The daemon sat calmly in the centre of the road, waiting for him. Its white robes stood out in stark contrast to the black rock, as did the nest of pale limbs huddled beside it, clutching a long scroll of parchment.

Sigvald reluctantly slowed his pace to a trot and finally came to a halt a few feet away, his face flushed with exertion and elation.

Belus Pül rose to greet him with a slight bow, then turned to its scribe. “The divine being rejoiced in its child’s return from the unearthly realm. It was gratifying to see that its faith had not been in—”

The daemon’s words were cut short, twisted into a wordless grunt, as Sigvald strode forwards and jammed his new rapier into its stomach.

Belus looked down in horror to see a dark red stain spreading across its white habit. “What has happened?” it gasped, frantically shaking its head. “How could—?”

“The sword was a gift,” Sigvald replied with a playful grin. He wrenched it free and allowed the daemon to collapse in a shower of blood. “Its edge is keen enough even for you, Belus.”

The daemon’s scribe scuttled back in fear, scattering parchments as it went.

“I see you’ve released me from my bonds,” said Sigvald, noticing that his bronze torque had vanished from the daemon’s arm.

Belus Pül curled up into a foetal position and began to wail.

Sigvald dropped to one knee and whispered in the daemon’s ear. “No matter. I think our friendship has reached a natural end, don’t you?” He nodded

to the shimmering, bloodstained rapier. "I've made a new allegiance, Belus." He chuckled. "You might say I move in different circles now."

The daemon's wailing turned into a furious screech and one of its hands shot out towards Sigvald's throat.

The prince was too fast. He rocked back with preternatural speed and gripped the daemon's wrist. "Maybe you'll die," he whispered, looking at the pool of blood spreading across the road, "like some wretched, feckless mortal."

Then he loosed his grip and stood up. As he stepped back from the groaning daemon, Sigvald wiped a few speckles of blood from his armour, frowning slightly until he was sure his armour was clean.

"What a place to spend your final hours, though," he cried, waving at the fantastical landscape that surrounded them. Shimmering lights blurred the boundary between earth and sky and diaphanous hosts whirled above them, riding to battle across heavens. Sigvald grinned as he looked back at the bleeding daemon. "And the pain should be wonderful."

As he turned to leave, the prince looked briefly at the scribe. "Sigvald returned from the Immaterial Realm," he intoned, in a mocking, singsong voice, "reborn and renewed. The prince repaid his former patron with the gift of a new, exquisite sensation and then headed south, eager to claim his prize."



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Screams rang out. Whether in pain or ecstasy, it was impossible to tell, but Baron Schüler reined in his horse and cursed bitterly at the delay.

He was still half a mile from the Norscans, but the right flank of his army was disintegrating. The garish ranks were collapsing beneath a tide of crimson and brass and long, grinding fangs.

“What’s this?” he cried, rising up in his saddle and straining to see through the carnage.

The snowstorm was suddenly alive with fleet, lupine shapes, hurling themselves into battle with a chorus of barks and snarls. Schüler drew his sword as he saw that one of them was powering straight towards him, carving a path through Sigvald’s troops with astonishing speed. As it approached, he saw it more clearly. It was a hound, but unlike any he had ever seen before. The creature was almost as large as his horse and covered in red, reptilian scales. Something flashed beneath its slavering jaws and Schüler realised that the hound was wearing a thick brass collar.

“Keep moving!” he howled, looking around at his men and waving his sword at the Norscans up ahead.

It was useless.

The alabaster-skinned daemonettes forgot all sense of order as they turned to face the hounds. Any hope of advance was lost as they abandoned themselves to the equal pleasures of killing and dying.

The baron groaned in dismay as he looked at the distant line of Northmen.

“Freydís,” he whispered, extending his left arm towards Sväla’s army, as though he could pluck the princess from the distant ranks of figures.

“Baron!” cried Énka, grabbing the reins of Schüler’s horse and dragging the animal to one side.

Schüler just had time to raise his sword as the snarling hound launched itself at his head.

Pain exploded in his face as the creature crashed into him. Plates of sharpened metal had been grafted onto its scaly hide and as Schüler flew back from his horse he felt his nose disintegrate with a crunch of breaking bone.

The baron lurched up from the snow in a fountain of blood and curses. He still had hold of his sword and levelled it at the snarling monster as it turned and padded back towards him.

As the baron crouched in readiness, with blood pooling around him, a column of pink flames roared past his head and slammed into the hound, enveloping its crimson flesh in liquid, lurid fire.

The hound stumbled to a halt, snorting and sniffing the air, but showing no signs of pain. Then it singled out the source of the fire and bolted forwards with a furious bellow.

Énka crumpled into the snow as the beast tore into him, but within seconds the hound ceased its snarling and lifted its head in confusion.

There was no sorcerer beneath its huge paws and neither was there a single drop of blood.

The monster pawed at the snow in confusion, then stiffened and dropped to its knees as the baron rammed his blade down between its shoulder blades, pinning it to the ground.

As the monster thrashed wildly in an attempt to free itself, the baron grabbed its steel mane of spikes and began to hack at its throat with a long knife drawn from his belt.

“Magic has no effect,” gasped Énka reappearing from somewhere and shaking his head in dismay. “They must have been sent by Khorne himself. Mord Huk has called on his god to avenge the attack on his fortress.”

He grabbed the baron’s arm and wrenched him away from the thrashing monster. “You’ll never kill it!” he cried.

The baron reeled away from the hound, rocking back on his heels as he tried to straighten his bleeding nose. “Then we must advance,” he said in a nasal grunt.

He looked around for his horse and dragged himself up into the saddle.

“Baron!” cried the sorcerer, as the crimson beast hauled itself up from the

ground and rounded on him.

“Freydís,” muttered the baron as he kicked his horse into motion, disappearing in a cloud of snow and leaving his army to its fate.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The Norscans howled as they charged through the snow. Thousands of voices, raised in unison, echoed across the Wastes. The Fallen had abandoned their homes and endured horrors they would never forget, all for this one chance. Rage, grief and hope poured out of them as they raced towards the enemy.

“He’s coming for you,” cried Sväla as she ran, lifting her voice above the cacophony. She pointed her knife to a single figure riding out to meet them.

Freydís let out a bitter laugh. “He wouldn’t abandon his army for my sake.” She strained forward, peering at the approaching knight. “I’m not sure that’s even him.”

Sväla was about to reply when she noticed that the deafening war cries were now mingled with a new sound: screams.

Far over on the left flank of the army the charge had already stalled. The snow was falling as thick as ever, and it was hard to be sure what was happening, but Sväla could just make out tall, crimson shapes, lurching through her men and moving with incredible speed.

As the left flank collapsed, the army lost all its momentum. Disorder and confusion spread quickly through the ranks as the Norscans abandoned their charge and swung round to defend their screaming kin. The monsters’ attack seemed utterly without logic or cohesion: the tall, red shapes leapt from one victim to another in a frenzy of bloodlust, hacking at the Norscans with no sense of tactics or control.

“No!” cried Sväla, her voice shrill with panic. “Don’t stop! Sigvald is

within reach!”

It was useless. Her voice was lost beneath the din of battle as the Norscans turned their spears on the red horrors that were ploughing into them. As Sväla began to see the attacking host more clearly, her heart sank. The lurching, frenetic creatures were vaguely humanoid, but they were covered in thick, red scales and as they sprinted back and forth, they gored the Norscans with long, sweeping horns that hung down from their bestial heads.

Sväla realised that left unchecked, the hellish creatures would butcher her entire army. “Daemons!” she cried, grabbing her son’s shoulder. “They’re daemons! Turn the army around. We can’t advance with these things at our backs.”

He nodded in reply and let out another blast on his whalebone horn, signalling for the army to round on the attackers.

The Norscan army was so vast that whole swathes of the crusaders had not even realised they were under attack. Dozens of other musicians mimicked Svärd’s horn blast though and gradually the host began to swing around in the direction of the red figures. Within a few minutes, tens of thousands of stern-faced warriors were thundering through the slushy snow to reinforce the flank.

Sväla found herself caught up in a tsunami of spears and axes as her army turned on its heel and charged west. There was nothing she could do but join the others in hurtling towards the enemy. As she neared them, she saw the monsters in more detail: their snarling, bestial jaws were lined with razor-sharp teeth and they carried long, jet-black swords that crackled with dark sorcery as they hacked into her people. Even after all she had seen since they set sail from Norsca, Sväla’s mind recoiled from the sight of the hideous beasts but her resolve was firm. She waved the men on with her iron knife.

“Crush them!” she cried. “They’re in the hundreds, we’re a whole nation!”

Few were able to hear her words, but the truth of them was quickly apparent. Despite the ferociousness of the monsters’ attack, the sheer, unstoppable weight of bodies crashing into them soon made it impossible for them to swing their long swords, or even move. As the Norscans piled on top of their attackers, they jammed spears through scales and cleaved heads from shoulders with terror-fuelled desperation. As the monsters’ movements became more restricted, the Norscans’ confidence grew. They piled into them in ever increasing numbers, pinning the creatures to the ground with the weight of their bodies and dismembering them before they had chance to rise.

The daemons showed no sign of fear, even as they were torn apart, and the few who managed to break free made no attempt at retreat, they simply bellowed

with rage, lowered their horns and charged back into the fray, flinging bodies left and right until they were forced back down onto their knees.

“We have them!” cried Svärd, wiping a splash of blood from his face as he turned back towards Sväla and the princess.

The princess laughed and pointed over his head. There was a black line moving towards them through the storm. “I think that was just to get your attention. Here comes the real attack.”

Svärd’s eyes widened as the shapes emerged from the glittering banks of snow. Tall, broad-shouldered knights clad in dark, brass-edged armour were striding towards them, carrying cruel, two-handed axes. Their helmets had been designed to resemble feral, snarling hounds, but it was not so much the rank and file that terrified Svärd, it was the figure at their head. Riding out in front, on what looked like a colossal, metal-clad bull, was their captain. He was even larger than the other knights and clearly the inspiration for their helmets. He had the head of a slaver, red-eyed dog.

For a brief second, Svärd felt the crimson, canine eyes boring into him. Then the knight placed a large brass skull over his head and levelled his axe at the Norscans, letting out a long, mournful howl.

The knights howled in reply and rushed to attack.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Sigvald didn't break his stride as he reached Mord Huk's army. Still laughing, he tore through the crimson ranks, dealing out death as he ran.

The knights looked back in confusion as the ground tilted and heaved. They saw a flash of gold and a blissful grin, before collapsing in a shower of blood, clutching at holes that had suddenly appeared in their chests.

"Make way for a god," cried Sigvald, vaulting over the tumbling knights. His heart was racing and his veins felt as though they were channelling fire. Within minutes, he would have the skull, a relic from the throne of Khorne that would channel unimaginable power through his mind. His whole being was consumed with a desire more potent than any he had yet known.

As the Geld-Prince carved a path through the rear of the army, storm clouds rolled and tumbled in his wake, blocking the pale moonlight and plunging the battlefield into darkness. The only light that remained came from Sigvald himself. As he raced through the serried ranks, his armour shone like a fallen star, flickering in an ocean of lumbering shadows.

Sigvald's laughter rang out through the darkness as Mord Huk's knights rounded on him, lifting their great, two-handed axes and bellowing with rage as they charged. As the knights smashed into him, the Geld-Prince was finally forced to slow. He hacked and lunged wildly with his rapier and came to a gasping halt on a mound of corpses. He leapt to the top of the bloody heap and raised his sword to the heavens, just as a shaft of moonlight broke through the clouds and poured down over him.

Picked out in the spotlight, the grinning prince could be seen for miles around and the knights nearest to him stumbled in confusion. None of them had ever witnessed such a dazzling vision of unholy power. The column of light resembled the gaze of a god, shining down benevolently on its most beloved child. A glittering mantle of snowflakes surrounded Sigvald as he surveyed his brutish enemies.

“Avert your gaze!” he cried, his voice ringing out across the battlefield and his eyes blazing with scorn. He turned his sword towards Mord Huk’s knights. “Do not presume to turn such repulsive faces in my direction.”

To their amazement, whole swathes of the army looked away in shame, humbled by the prince’s words. Others roared in defiance and launched themselves at him, but before they could reach the Geld-Prince, their brother-knights clubbed them to the ground, desperate to protect the glittering prince. Within minutes, all of the dog-helmed men near Sigvald had turned on each other, hacking fiercely at their own kin and forgetting about the vast Norscan horde bearing down on them.

As the crimson knights fought, Sigvald looked up at the rolling clouds and held out his hand in a summoning gesture. Silent forks of lightning splintered across the ink-black sky at his command. He shook his head in wonder, following the brittle needles of light as they knifed towards him. Then, as the snowstorm doubled in fury, Sigvald hurled himself headlong back into the fray. He crashed into the toiling figures like a comet, scattering armour, weapons, limbs and even rock; but rather than halting, the fighting only intensified. Sigvald emerged right in the heart of the schism, drenched in gore and rolling his eyes ecstatically. His animal frenzy was infectious and the knights around him began to swing their weapons indiscriminately, not caring whose flesh they severed. The whole scene quickly descended into a sadistic orgy of bloodletting, captured in brief bursts by the flickering light and accompanied by Sigvald’s joyous, ringing laughter.

“I’m a god,” he cried, his voice exultant and musical.

As the knights fought, some of them began to tear at their own armour, removing helmets and breastplates until they were naked, seeming to savour every wound that tore their exposed flesh. As their movements became more erratic and frenzied, some of them even began to change physically: grinning lustily as their flesh drained of colour and their hands became hard, serrated claws.

As the confusion spread, Sigvald moved on through the chaos with a column of wide-eyed converts trailing after him. “Where’s your lord?” he cried,

grabbing a knight by his canine helmet. The warrior cowered and waved across the battlefield, pointing to where Mord Huk's men were toppling beneath waves of howling Norscans. Sigvald nodded and threw him to the ground, racing on through the carnage.

Sigvald had barely taken more than a few steps before he forgot his purpose and dived into another scrum of bodies, lashing out with his rapier and whooping ecstatically as he fell on the struggling knights. He tore armour open with his bare hands and sank his teeth into straining necks, covering his face with hot, pumping blood. As he dived and hacked through the battle, even more of Mord Huk's knights staggered to a halt and watched in awe, before following his example and turning on whoever was stood nearest to them.

"My lord!" cried a voice, slicing through sounds of breaking bones and grinding steel.

Sigvald rose from the battle in a fountain of blood, with a severed head in one hand and his rapier in the other. As he climbed to his feet, the gore evaporated from his armour and face, leaving him immaculate as he turned to see who had spoken.

A gaunt, bearded figure was riding towards him, his face smeared with blood.

"Schüler!" cried Sigvald, dropping the head and racing towards the baron.

As the ground rolled and lurched, Schüler's horse panicked and hurled its rider from its back. The baron landed with a clatter and cried out in pain. He was still trying to climb to his feet when he found himself enveloped in a fierce embrace.

"Proud, brave friend!" said Sigvald clutching the baron's shoulders and smiling at him with unalloyed delight. "How can I ever repay you?"

Schüler shook his head in mute confusion and frowned, blinded by the daemonic light pouring from the prince's eyes.

Sigvald waved to the ocean of violence that surrounded them. "I'd forgotten how to live, baron," he gasped. "How to *really* live! If you hadn't told me about the brass skull, I would have rotted in that palace. Who knows how many centuries I would have wasted? Maybe none of this would have ever come to pass, if you hadn't inspired me to action."

As knights fought all around them, the prince pulled the baron close and clutched his skeletal head. "You wouldn't believe the things I've seen, Schüler." He closed his eyes for a second and moaned ecstatically. When he looked back at the baron there were tears in his eyes. "I've travelled beyond the curtains of light, baron. I've seen another world. I've been forged anew in the realm of the

gods. And all because of you.”

Schüler shook his head and tried to hide his disappointment with a rictus grin. “And you survived.”

“More than survived! Look at me!” Sigvald waved a hand at the ground and it rippled away in a liquid surge, sending rows of knights to their knees. “I’m a god!”

Schüler gasped and reeled away from the prince. Then his eyes narrowed. “But what about the brass skull?”

“It’s mine,” giggled Sigvald. “Or as good as. What could stop me now?” He waved at the mayhem that surrounded them. “Mord Huk is here somewhere, looking for me.” His laughter grew hysterical. “He’s looking for *me*, baron! Do you see? And I’m a *god*!” The prince staggered back from Schüler, looking down at his immaculate gold armour and shaking his head in disbelief. “I’m a god,” he kept repeating, tracing his hands over the engravings on his cuirass.

Baron Schüler cursed as one of the towering knights loomed out of the shifting darkness, raising his axe to strike. “Sigvald!” he cried, barely parrying the blow with his sword and collapsing to his knees.

The prince looked up with a glazed expression. Then he saw the knight, about to swing his axe again, and leapt at him with a furious howl.

A fine spray of blood erupted from the knight’s visor as Sigvald flew towards him. Before the prince had even reached him, the knight’s armour collapsed inwards with a hollow clunk and he crumpled to the ground with a horrible whining whistle.

Sigvald placed a foot on his throat and forced his head into the bloody slush.

The ground fractured and split, allowing Sigvald to stamp the man’s head beneath the surface. Then it folded back into place over his neck, leaving the man to thrash his limbs, with his head embedded in the stone.

“Schüler,” said Sigvald, turning away and dropping to the baron’s side. “Are you hurt?”

Schüler stared at him, speechless.

Sigvald dragged him to his feet, fending off another attack as they staggered back towards the horse. “Follow me,” he cried, helping Schüler back into the saddle. “Everything is starting here, today!” Then he sprinted off into the fighting, shouldering knights aside like blades of grass as he raced towards the front line.

At the point where the two armies met, the sound of combat was deafening. Sigvald howled in delight, seeing that, despite the horrific nature of their foes,

the Norscans were gradually forcing Mord Huk's army back. As he neared the crush of desperate faces and whirling blades, he saw a pair of women hacking and punching through the fray. They were leading the Norscan charge and making a line straight for him. One of the women was dressed in nothing but a few ragged scraps of fur, but her sinewy limbs were covered in fierce-looking tattoos and her face was locked in a determined snarl. The woman at her side was clearly not a Norscan. She was clad from head to toe in baroque, purple armour and wielding a slender, glinting scimitar. She moved through the hulking warriors with such serpentine ease that she seemed to be dancing. Sigvald gasped and stumbled to a halt, recognising her immediately.

"Freydís," he said, lowering his rapier and staring at her, utterly enraptured.

The fury of the first woman and the skill of the second made them unstoppable, and they easily sliced a path through the battle. The grim-faced Norscans surrounding them were dropping in their dozens, hacked apart by the dog-helmed knights, but their advance was relentless: wave after wave of them poured over Mord Huk's men, wedging spears under their plate armour and dragging them down to die in the snow.

Sigvald stood motionless as the women approached, the battle forgotten as he studied the lethal beauty racing towards him.

"We have him!" cried the tattooed woman, levelling an iron knife at Sigvald as she clambered over the toppling knights. Her voice was hoarse with emotion as she rallied her men. "Sigvald is here!"

The Norscan army replied with a single, deafening voice. The sound of so many people howling at once was like nothing Sigvald had ever heard. He dragged his gaze from Freydís and surveyed the ravaging horde. "Wonderful," he muttered, still nodding in respect as they broke through a line of knights and sprinted towards him.

At the last minute, Sigvald dropped into a crouch, jamming his rapier through the belly of the first man to reach him; then, as more slammed into him, he rolled back across the snow under the weight of them, laughing wildly as he punched and flailed.

The Norscans' weapons clattered uselessly against his gold armour and Sigvald rose to his feet with a grin, lifting his rapier to the swirling clouds with a man skewered on the blade.

"Freydís!" cried the tattooed woman as she reached the edge of the scrum. "What do we do?"

As the princess sauntered into view, the Norscans backed away, creating a circle around her and Sigvald.

Sigvald dropped the corpse and fell to his knees, clutching his chest as though he had been shot. "Freydís," he groaned, shaking his head, "look at you. What a vision." He seemed utterly dazed by her appearance and kept repeating her name, as though it were a prayer.

The princess stepped in front of him and stood there for a few seconds, glaring down at him.

At the edge of the clearing, Sväla edged forward, her knife held in readiness, her eyes wide with hope.

"Liar," said Freydís and dealt Sigvald a ferocious backhanded blow to the face.

Sigvald sprawled on his back and looked up at her in amazement. "I don't —"

Before the prince could finish, Freydís kicked him in the stomach and he rolled away, gagging. "You left me to die!" she screamed, pointing her scimitar at him and trembling with rage. "You left me with that bloated, gluttonous..." her words trailed off as Sigvald rose to his feet and grinned at her.

Despite all the bloodshed, Sigvald's armour was still unmarked and his skin shone with such an unnatural, lunar glow, that it seemed as though Freydís were talking to a sliver of moonlight.

"How could I have left you?" asked the prince, shaking his head in genuine confusion as he studied Freydís' flushed cheeks and flashing eyes. He tilted his head back, exposing his neck. "Kill me, Freydís. What an honour: to die by such an exquisite hand."

Freydís rushed at him with a snarl, but rather than slitting his throat, she kissed it passionately; lowering her sword and crushing her body against his.

Sigvald frowned in confusion, then grabbed her head and smothered it with kisses. The couple forgot the battle raging around them as they locked in a fierce embrace.

"Freydís!" cried Sväla, horrified. She dashed forwards and wrenched the princess from her husband's grip.

Sigvald's sword flashed.

Sväla reeled back, trying to stem the fountain of blood that erupted from her throat.

Svärd broke through the front row of Norscans and caught his mother as she fell, pressing his hand over the wound as he dragged her back into the crowd.

Sigvald turned to his wife with a raised eyebrow.

"A peasant woman," replied Freydís with an embarrassed shrug. "I needed

someone's help to reach you." She waved at the ranks of awed faces that surrounded them. "And, conveniently, she had this group of primitives with her."

"Kill him!" cried Svärd, as he dragged his convulsing mother away. "This is our chance!"

The Norscans hesitated. They had never seen anything so resplendent as Sigvald and his princess. As they looked around at each other they saw an ungainly, slouching rabble. Months of hardship had left their faces so haggard and cadaverous that it seemed absurd to think that they could attack such majestic beings.

"The curse!" cried Sväla, her voice liquid and raw. She tried to rise from Svärd's lap and levelled her knife at the prince. "Everything stems from him! This is it! This is what we've been dying for! He's blinding you with sorcery."

Finally, some of the Norscans lurched into action, flinging spears and knives at the prince and rushing forwards. Many more stayed their hands, and some even dragged their kinsmen to the ground, plunging knives into their backs with strange, hungry smiles on their faces.

Sigvald shoved Freydís behind his back and adopted an en garde position, still grinning as they charged towards him.

The fighting was fast and furious. The Fallen had finally laid hands on the source of their shame and they howled victoriously as they crashed into him. Sigvald's rapier flashed back and forth, sending dozens of them spinning to the ground without any apparent effort. Despite his skill though, it looked for a moment as though the sheer volume of them might overwhelm him. Then Mord Huk's knights surged forwards in a counter-attack and the scene descended into utter confusion. Something seemed to have driven the knights into a frenzy. Those who had stripped away their armour and begun to mutate ploughed into their brothers *and* the Norscans, giggling hysterically as they fought. Others let out a mournful battle cry and charged into the main body of Sväla's army. Behind them, a huge shape was stamping through the lightning-charged storm, its vast bulk shrouded in gouts of steam and pulsing with unearthly lights.

The waves of Norscans finally overwhelmed Sigvald's defenders and the whole tumult collapsed backwards, burying the prince beneath a mound of toiling limbs and grinding armour.

As the figures collapsed on top of each other, more and more of them seemed to be infected with Sigvald's lunacy. Hundreds of the knights had now sprouted elongated, plum-coloured limbs and fluttering, scaled wings, and as they revelled in their new forms, their movements became increasingly frenzied.

As soldiers tumbled and rolled across the bloodstained snow, the hulking

shape emerged from the storm with a rumbling, lowing sound. It was a colossal bull-like creature with a hide of riveted brass and steel. There was a single, bloody tusk mounted on its muzzle and as its gore-encrusted hooves crunched over the fallen knights, liquid fire dripped from its joints, revealing glimpses of a diabolical furnace in its chest. The same malevolent light poured from its eyes, flashing across swords and shields as it entered the clearing.

Mounted on its back was a great, armour-clad brute, wearing a blood-splattered brass skull.

Mord Huk had arrived.

“Sigvald!” he growled, raising a jagged, two-handed sword over his head and waving the iron-clad beast forwards. Dark currents of power coursed around the blade as he pointed it at the pile of knights, Norscans and freakish shapes. “Show yourself!” he bellowed.

At the sound of Mord Huk’s voice, some of the less demented combatants backed away, cowering at the sight of the approaching figure.

Sigvald dragged himself from the thrashing bodies and staggered back against the men stood nearest to him.

Axes and spears were lowered as the soldiers paused to watch the encounter.

Sigvald reeled back and forth for a few moments, shaking his mane of golden hair and trying to clear his head. Then he stumbled to a halt, sensing the vast presence looming over him.

His eyes widened at the sight of the glinting brass skull.

Then he let his head rock back on his shoulders and emitted a long, wailing moan of pleasure. As his cry rang out across the battlefield the lightning flared brighter, drenching the soldiers in a sapphire glow. “Finally!” cried Sigvald, fixing his gaze on the helmet. “It’s mine!”

Mord Huk gave no reply as he climbed down from his hellish mount and stomped across the corpse-strewn ground, gripping the hilt of his long blade in both hands as he prepared to attack. His blood-red armour was as thick and jagged as his soldiers’ and scored with dozens of foul, pulsing runes. Every inch of his eight-foot frame was covered in dried blood and deep within his helmet shone a pair of feral, hate-filled eyes.

Sigvald’s head began to twitch slightly as he watched Mord Huk approach. The brass skull was reflected in his eyes and his fingers flexed in anticipation as he prepared to fight.

Mord Huk let out a feral grunt, drew back his monstrous blade and swung it at Sigvald’s chest.

Sigvald parried with a fluid, casual twirl of his rapier and Mord Huk stumbled across the clearing, propelled by the force of his own attack. Sigvald made no attempt to strike back. He closed his eyes instead and turned his face up to the falling snow.

Mord Huk flew back at him with a snarling grunt, thrusting his blade at the prince's stomach.

Just in time, Sigvald opened his eyes and swerved out of harm's way, playfully rattling his rapier along Mord Huk's sword as it rushed past him. "I can't bear to see this end," he muttered, looking around at the circle of expectant faces. "After everything I've achieved to get here, I feel as though—"

His words turned into an explosion of breath as Mord Huk hammered the hilt of his sword into the prince's back, sending him crashing to his knees.

"There are more gods than yours," grunted the knight as he drew back his crackling blade to strike again.

Sigvald rolled to one side, avoiding the full force of the next blow, but the blade sliced through the pauldron of his gold armour, tearing through the metal with a nerve-jangling screech. As he tumbled away, a thin arc of blood sprayed up the side of his face.

"What's this?" Sigvald gasped, touching the blood as he climbed to his feet and backed away from his opponent.

"Punishment," grunted Mord Huk, holding up his serrated blade so that Sigvald could see the lines of power rippling over the filthy metal.

"Magic?" cried Sigvald, clutching his wound in shock, as he realised that his armour was not going to heal itself.

Mord Huk shook his head as he struck again. "A Blood Blessing."

Sigvald parried again, but now there was doubt in his eyes. The pain in his shoulder was sharp and unexpected. As he deflected Mord Huk's blow and sent his great bulk stumbling into the onlookers, Sigvald launched himself at the knight's back. The pair of them were briefly picked out in a flash of lightning; locked in a desperate embrace, before vanishing from view.

For a few seconds the ranks of bloody soldiers stared at each other in confusion, then they poured into the void left by the two duelling champions, screaming and howling as they tore into each other.

As Sigvald and Mord Huk careered through the storm, Sigvald's laughter rose above the sound of thunder and clashing blades. Wherever he passed, the fight descended into mayhem. At the sight of the prince's gleeful acrobatics, the soldiers turned on whoever was nearest, giggling maniacally as their bodies began to writhe and transform.

Neither of the two champions seemed able to break the deadlock. For over an hour they crashed and lunged through the battle, and each time Sigvald was revealed, the division between the two armies became less clear, as they broke ranks and began to change. Thick crimson armour was replaced by engraved lilac steel, or torn away completely to reveal pale, naked flesh.

Finally, just as Sigvald was beginning to tire, a tall, hooded figure emerged from the writhing shadows; punching and shouldering his way through the battle and making a direct line for the pair of champions.

Neither Sigvald nor his opponent noticed the gangly figure, but as the prince collapsed to his knees, utterly exhausted, the giant raced past him and slammed into Mord Huk's chest, sending them both toppling backwards into the snow.

Mord Huk let out a furious rumble of pain and cracked the hilt of his sword against his attacker's head.

There was a dull *crunch*, and the newcomer's hood sagged at an odd angle, but there was no trace of blood and his grip remained firm, pinning Mord Huk to the ground.

Sigvald climbed to his feet with a groan and grabbed his rapier from the corpse-strewn slush. As he recognised the shape wrestling with his opponent, a relieved smile returned to his face. "Oddrún," he said, stumbling towards him.

As Mord Huk struggled to free himself from beneath Oddrún, he landed blow after blow on the giant's hunched, robed body. The sizzling blade sliced through the sackcloth, cutting deep into Oddrún's back, but the chancellor showed no sign of pain and tightened his grip with every cut.

Sigvald strode forwards and sliced down with his rapier.

Still containing Mord Huk's snorting, feral head, the brass skull span off through the storm.

Oddrún collapsed onto the headless corpse.

Sigvald sprinted after the helmet, quickly disappearing into the shifting ranks of soldiers.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“Which way?” Muttered Svärd, wiping the snow from his face.

Sväla looked up from the makeshift litter, her head reeling with pain and blood loss. For a minute she struggled to remember what had happened, then she saw the long trail of blood and the rows of desolate faces trudging after her.

Of course.

Everything was lost.

The battle had continued for what seemed like an eternity, but after the first few hours the slaughter had become utterly senseless. Allegiances had been abandoned, along with tactics, logic and sanity. She had tried desperately to maintain some kind of order, but as soon as she was wounded, Sväla had been powerless to stem the madness. As Svärd dragged her away from Sigvald, she had seen the Fallen transformed by the Geld-Prince’s sorcery: half of them into a raving mob, and the rest into a grotesque, gibbering menagerie. The figures stumbling after her through the snow were the few who had hung on to any semblance of reason. Of the original, vast host, there were fewer than a thousand survivors. She wondered vaguely when Sigvald’s creatures would hunt them down, but her thoughts were too shattered to question anything very deeply and she simply shook her head.

“Just keep the mountains at your back,” she replied in a thin, rasping voice.

Svärd grimaced and stumbled on, dragging the litter behind him.

Sväla nervously ran a hand over her throat. The old witch, Ürsüla, had smeared a foul black paste over the wound. It had slowed the bleeding but

tripled the pain. She wondered if it would have any other effects. The Wolf's blessings were not always predictable. Still, if it wasn't for Ürsüla she would be long dead; Sväla had no doubt of that.

At the memory of the old woman she searched her out in the crowd, wondering how *she* was still alive. Warriors and chieftains had died in their thousands since they left Norsca, but the frail old woman was still stumping determinedly through the snow, clad in her strange mantle of sticks, bones and sealskin. Her short, silver hair was matted with blood but her vivid green eyes had lost none of their humour. Sväla noticed that the witch was watching her and chomping thoughtfully on her pipe.

"I was betrayed," Sväla croaked defensively, meeting the old woman's eye.

"Not by me," replied the witch with a laugh that quickly became a wracking cough.

"Ungaur's statue gave me a name, but you explained the legend," said Sväla, attempting to sit up. "You must have known it would all end like this." She pointed her knife at the smirking woman. "Your mud dolls told you everything. You must have foreseen that we could never defeat Sigvald. You must have seen that we could never escape the curse."

The witch sucked on her pipe and let the smoke pour down through her shrivelled nose. "Defeat Sigvald? I never said anything about that." She shrugged. "I suppose I did say something about you leading us to victory though."

"Yes," cried Sväla, her voice cracking. "That's exactly what you said!" A little colour crept back into her tattooed cheeks as she recalled their first meeting. "Why did you say that?" She waved her knife at the pitiful wrecks stumbling after them. "Look at what you've done. Everyone's dead, or worse."

The old woman simply grinned and took another drag on her pipe. Then she turned away, her tiny frame disappearing quickly in the limping ranks of survivors.

"Ürsüla!" cried Sväla, rising furiously from the litter.

Pain erupted in her throat and she collapsed back with a groan.

"Mother?" asked Svärd, pausing to look down at her.

"Keep going," she snapped. "Keep the mountains at your back."

As the litter bounced along the brittle snow, Sväla's head swam horribly, filled with visions of slaughter and perversion. Then, with a shock, she realised that she must have fallen asleep. The mountains behind them were suddenly further away and the golden castle was now little more than a large star, flickering in the snowstorm. Ignoring the pain, she rolled onto her side and

looked past Svärd's legs to see what was ahead of them.

Her heart sank.

Nothing was familiar. All she could see for miles around was jagged peaks and vast, featureless tracts of snow. How would they ever find the coast? She shivered violently. Svärd had wrapped her in furs, but the cold was persistent, leeching through her wiry limbs and spreading deep into her bones. Despair filled her and her head dropped. As she looked down, she noticed the two wedding rings, still knotted to her finger. At the sight of the battered metal, something stirred in her chest; a tiny flicker of anger. "Völtar," she croaked. "Look at what we've done in your name. Look at what we've sacrificed. How can you just abandon us?"

There was no reply and she collapsed with a bitter curse, clamping her eyes shut and willing the world away.

After an hour or so of silent trudging she noticed that Svärd was muttering to himself.

"What's that?" she asked, without opening her eyes.

"There's something moving about in the snow, up ahead," he replied, sounding hesitant. "Some kind of dog."

Sväla gasped and sat up, turning to look past him again.

"I see it!" she cried, slapping her hands on the litter. "It's not a dog, it's a wolf."

He looked down at her in confusion. "How could it survive out here, miles from anything?"

"Exactly," she said, with growing excitement in her voice. "No normal creature could."

He shook his head, still confused. "Then what—?"

"Move faster," interrupted Sväla, slapping her hands on the litter again. "Catch it up!"

The youth groaned and tried to drag a bit more speed from his aching limbs.

As the litter bounced across the snow, Sväla fixed her eyes on the fleeting shape and began to nod. "It's him," she muttered. "It's him."

Svärd picked up on the excitement in Sväla's voice and increased his pace further. Soon, they had left the others behind as they raced after the wolf.

After a few minutes, the wolf padded up a small incline and sat down, silhouetted against the storm and looking down at the approaching Norscans with a calm, regal gaze.

As Svärd dragged his mother towards the hill, the storm worsened, sending great swelling banks of snow around the creature, briefly obscuring it from view.

By the time the flurry had cleared, Svärd had dragged the litter halfway up the slope, leaving them close enough to see that the wolf had been replaced by something very different.

As they reached the summit, they saw two figures waiting for them. One was tall, slender and dressed in white, but the other was hard to make out. It was crumpled on the ground in a heap of twitching limbs.

“Finally, the deity laid eyes on its most beloved prophet,” said the tall figure, as Svärd stumbled to a confused halt.

The two Norscans stared at the white-robed figure in horror. Even without the black horns sprouting from its head, they would have known the creature for what it was: a daemon. Such a foul, aberrant air surrounded it that Svärd backed away and raised his javelin in fear.

Sväla was equally panicked, but maintained enough composure to notice that the daemon was horribly wounded. There was a dark gash in its belly that had stained its robes with steaming, black blood. Despite its beatific smile, the thing was clearly in pain, clutching at the wound with one of its slender hands.

“What are you?” Sväla croaked, trying to quell the terror in her voice.

The daemon turned to its companion and said: “Belus Pül was filled with pity at the sight of its prophet. The poor soul could not even recognise her own master.”

Svärd let out a curse as he saw the daemon’s scribe. The naked, faceless creature was sitting in its nest of spider-like limbs, just a few feet behind Belus. Only a small black hook, sunk deep into its side, alluded to its former existence.

“We need to leave,” gasped Svärd, grabbing the litter.

“Wait!” snapped Sväla, raising her hand. She still had her eyes fixed on Belus as she sat up. “What do you mean, ‘prophet’?”

“It seemed strange that the girl could not recognise her own god,” replied Belus, stooping over the scribe to ensure it had correctly captured the inflections of its voice, “after being so carefully guided by it for several months.”

Sväla shook her head in confusion. The prim, formal tones *did* sound oddly familiar. To her horror, she realised that the voice reminded her of the visions that had originally driven her to action. Then she remembered a more recent incident: the wolf that had led her to Sigvald’s floating palace had sounded just the same.

“You?” she said, with a terrible sinking feeling in her stomach. “You’re the one who led me north?” She looked in disgust at the daemon’s angelic face. “Why?”

“Few mortals can comprehend the workings of a divine mind,” replied the

daemon, still facing the large ear implanted in its scribe's head, "but the deity endeavoured to explain to the prophet that its child, Sigvald the Magnificent, had committed the ultimate betrayal." The daemon paused and shook its head. "He had become boring. And the deity had been forced to seek a way to rouse the prince from his spiritual torpor; several ways in fact."

"I don't understand," said Sväla, shaking her head furiously. "I came north to rid my people of a terrible curse."

Belus winced, clutching at its bloody robes in obvious pain, then assumed its vacuous smile once more and continued. "The deity explained to its earnest young seer that games and stratagems are essential to keep a celestial mind amused. Cursing the prophet's tribe had been a simple task, and even waiting centuries for the plan to come to fruition had been no real chore."

The colour drained from Sväla's face. "*You* cursed us?"

The daemon maintained its innocent smile. "The prophet was awed by her master's power, but the deity was as humble as ever, explaining that a curse was a simple matter for a being of such infinite power. Filling the girl's head with visions had been even easier, and then the prophet's wonderful determination had ensured the rest."

Sväla let out a despairing moan and looked back at the approaching survivors. "It was all a lie then? Just because you wanted Sigvald to do something exciting, I've led my people to their doom?"

The daemon continued smiling.

As Sväla stared at the creature something strange happened to her vision. The snowstorm began to blur and fade and the daemon gradually vanished behind a crowd of spectral figures. She realised the daemon was beguiling her with another vision and shook her head fiercely, trying to escape the influx of scenes and faces. It was no use: as her nostrils filled with the scent of burning herbs she saw a vast ocean spread out before her. "The Sea of Chaos," she muttered, damping her hands around her head.

As she watched the tumbling pewter waves, she saw a small fleet of longships slicing towards a rocky coastline. "Norsca," she said, unable to suppress her excitement. She was witnessing the homecoming of her people. The image shifted again as the burning smell grew: she saw Svärd and the others returning to their mead halls and wattle huts, exhausted but alive. The setting changed again, and she saw her son leading them to battle against the neighbouring tribes. "Victory," she breathed, as she saw Svärd presenting a severed head to his baying warriors. "The curse is lifted."

The reek of smoke grew even stronger and Sväla was overcome by a fit of

coughing. The pain in her throat exploded once more and the visions fell away, returning her to the hilltop.

Standing a few feet away was the source of the smell. The old witch had climbed up the slope and was drawing deep on her pipe, frowning as her eyes flicked back and forth from Sväla to the daemon.

“Ürsüla,” cried Sväla.

“You’re being offered a choice,” replied the old woman, revealing her fulvous teeth in a grin.

Belus Pül narrowed its eyes at the sight of the decrepit witch, but did not acknowledge her. “The brave young prophet saw a chance to ensure the survival of her people. All she needed to do was dedicate herself utterly to her master and the curse would immediately be lifted. She realised that her tribe’s destiny depended entirely on this simple act of devotion.”

Svärd blanched and looked down at his groaning mother. “Don’t listen,” he cried. “It wants your soul.”

Sväla looked in confusion from her son to the old witch, then back at the daemon. “I can buy my people’s freedom with my soul?”

Belus nodded without turning to face her. “The prophet gradually began to grasp the enormous generosity of her god. If she submitted herself to the deity’s sweet embrace, her friends would easily find their way home, and no longer be blighted by ill luck.”

Sväla’s shoulders dropped. “Then I have no choice.” Her voice was taut with disbelief. “*I’ve* brought us to the brink of ruin. Damnation is a just reward.”

Svärd rushed back to her side. “I don’t think you should just—”

“Let your mother do the thinking,” interrupted Ürsüla, glaring at him.

Sväla still had her eyes fixed on the daemon. “What must I do?” she whispered.

Belus Pül raised one of its slender arms and rattled its disparate collection of bangles and rings. “For countless centuries, the Divine One had adopted its children with the most simple rite imaginable: the gift of jewellery. Of course, the objects must always be something of deep, personal significance. So the prophet thought very carefully about what would be her most precious belonging.”

Sväla nodded sadly and looked down at her two wedding rings. Her eyes filled with tears as the daemon stepped slowly towards her and held out an expectant hand.

“Surely you can think of something more valuable?” asked Ürsüla, nodding to a slender piece of silver hanging from Sväla’s belt.

She frowned and looked down at the glittering object, unsure for a moment what it was. So much had happened over the last few months that the horrific events had begun to merge into one. Then, as she studied the silver chain, she noticed the sun and moon device on the clasp and remembered the monster on the island. She suddenly understood why Ürsüla was suggesting that she offer the chain to Belus Pül. It was the chain Svärd had removed from the creature called Olandír: the chain that had kept the daemonic monster utterly powerless.

She turned to Ürsüla and saw that she was nodding almost imperceptibly.

But surely, thought Sväla, if the daemon has been my guide it will know about everything—including Olandír and his island prison. Surely it would know the power of the chain? Then she recalled something Ürsüla had said as they sat on the island, surrounded by the strange architecture: “There’s something here that has blocked your visions, Sväla,” she had said. “Something that has come between you and your spirit guide.” Maybe there was a chance then? Maybe the daemon would not recognise the chain? Maybe it would not see the trap? Sväla looked at Ürsüla again, finally understanding: if the daemon wore the chain it might be rendered as powerless as Olandír had been. And with such a creature bound to their will, their escape would be assured.

“Well, there’s this,” said Sväla, trying to keep her voice steady as she removed the chain and held it out to the daemon. “It belonged to one of my ancestors. I’ve guarded it with my life for as long as I can remember.”

Belus Pül plucked the chain from her fingers with a triumphant grin, dangled it in front of its nose and took a dainty sniff. Then it draped the links around its arm and prepared to click it in place.

Just as the daemon was about to clasp the chain shut, it paused and looked directly at Sväla, pursing its lips into a coy smile.



CHAPTER FORTY

The palace was aflame.

As Oddrún staggered through the smoke and the raucous crowds, he shook his head in disgust. The creatures' frenzied movements had left portraits blazing and windows shattered. A few more days of this and the whole building would be destroyed. It was inevitable really, thought the giant, as he struggled through the screaming throng, after Sigvald had incited such passion and corruption. Once they grew bored of the directionless battle, the creatures had turned their grotesque faces towards a new source of amusement: the Gilded Palace. They had lurched and fluttered after the despondent figure of Sigvald, calling out the prince's name as he trudged through the bloody snow towards home.

Oddrún entered the long throne room. The tiered balconies were crowded with wailing monsters. They were all locked in a series of embraces—whether amorous or aggressive it was impossible to tell, but the result was the same: great shards of stone were crashing down into the hungry flames and several of the marble pillars had toppled, smashing the beautifully tiled floor into a jagged, fractured mess. The giant maintained his usual, hunched gait, keeping his head down as he wove through the clamour.

Pale-skinned nymphs were writhing across the throne, but as he climbed to the top of the dais, Oddrún could see no sign of the prince. "Where's Sigvald?" he asked, grabbing one of the androgynous creatures.

The daemonette twisted its full, dark lips into a sneer and wrenched itself free, before dropping eagerly back onto its naked, gasping siblings.

Oddrún cursed and hurried on, making for the door that led to the prince's library.

The atmosphere changed dramatically as he crossed the threshold. The library was almost totally empty and as Oddrún closed the thick, oak door behind him, the orgiastic chorus faded to a muffled hum. The room was no less ruined than the others though. The towering shelves had been emptied, creating a mountain of torn pages and broken spines, and crouching, cat-like at the summit was Sigvald. He was glaring at an object he was clutching in both hands: a filthy brass skull.

"It's nothing," he spat, as the giant clambered up the books towards him.

Oddrún nodded in reply.

Sigvald waved at the surrounding carnage. A great hole had been blasted in one wall of the library, filling the room with moonlight and snow. "I've scoured every text I could think of and found no mention of the thing." He rapped his knuckles against the bloodstained brass and it chimed like a bell. "It's just metal: a thick, stupid lump of metal, moulded to protect a thick, stupid skull. It's not a conduit, or a talisman or anything that would link one to a god. The baron's as much of a fool as all the others." His jaw clenched, as though this disappointment was the most painful of all. "He was completely wrong, Oddrún."

The giant still didn't reply, so Sigvald let out a howl of frustration, lurched to his feet and hurled the skull across the library. It bounced off a bookshelf with a *clang* and rolled into a corner.

Oddrún watched in silence as the Geld-Prince dropped back onto the books and clutched his head in his hands.

"What's the point of any of it?" groaned the prince. "I have all this power and it's worth nothing. Nothing!" He looked up at his old friend with his face locked in a grimace. "Tell me, Oddrún—what is the point?" He waved at the ruins of his palace. "Shall I just build and destroy, over and over again, forever, until I can't even tell the difference?"

He snatched a page from beneath his feet and crumpled it into a ball, holding it so tightly in his fist that his veins began to throb. As he crushed the paper, a thin whining sound came from the back of his throat and his head began to tremble slightly. "Build and destroy," he moaned. "Build and destroy."

Oddrún climbed a little closer and sat down beside the prince. He prised apart Sigvald's fingers and removed the paper. "Maybe not," he said. "You're free of the daemon's pact. Maybe we could begin again, even now?"

Sigvald looked up at the giant with tears in his eyes, shaking his head in

disbelief. “You’re the biggest fool of all!” he cried. “You’re utterly, utterly mad, can’t you see? When will you abandon these pathetic delusions? It’s like a kind of torture, listening to you. You’re pulling my mind apart. Don’t you understand? We could never become mortal again. It’s absurd. Don’t you realise what a lunatic you are?” He waved at the giant’s awkwardly folded body and began to laugh through his tears. “Begin again? You make me seem positively sane!” He clutched his head in his hands again and his laughter became a groan. Then the two of them sat side by side in silence, lost in their own thoughts as the distant sounds of destruction seeped through the door.

After a while, Sigvald stood up and began climbing down the pile of books. “I’m going to find Freydís and leave,” he muttered. “Come with us, or don’t. Whatever you wish.”

“She’s already gone,” replied the giant.

Sigvald paused and looked back at him. “What do you mean, ‘gone’? She wouldn’t go anywhere without me.” A note of hysteria entered his voice. “She hacked her way through a whole army just to reach my side.”

“The baron took her. One of your captains saw him riding away from the battle. He had the princess strapped to the back of his horse and he was heading south, back to his own kingdom.”

Sigvald reeled as though he had been slapped. “Schüler? He’s taken Freydís?”

Oddrún nodded slowly. “He wasn’t a fool, Sigvald: he was a liar. He conned you into a war that he thought you could never win. He knew the skull was worthless, but he thought the quest would be the death of you.” The giant shrugged. “He wanted Freydís, but you were in his way.”

Sigvald shook his head and looked down at his open palms, as though expecting to see the baron riding across his pale skin. “He tricked me?”

Oddrún nodded.

Sigvald’s shoulders started to shake and he began making the strange whining noise again. “Schüler, Schüler, Schüler,” he wailed, still staring at his open hands.

Oddrún climbed wearily to his feet and went to Sigvald’s side, placing his hands on the prince’s trembling shoulders. “I know you had high hopes for him,” he said.

Sigvald looked up at the giant with a broad grin. “High hopes. Yes!” He gripped the giant’s arms. “But, by the gods, he’s exceeded all of them!” He threw back his head and laughed so hard that tears flooded from his eyes. “He was lying to me, all that time. *Lying*. What wonderful, perfect genius!”

The prince dashed to the ragged hole in the wall and leant out into the raging storm. "Schüler," he screamed, his eyes blazing with passion, "you're a genius!"

"He's stolen your wife," gasped Oddrún. "And only because he failed to kill you."

"Exactly!" cried Sigvald rounding on the giant. "I knew it!" He levelled a trembling finger at Oddrún. "From the first moment I saw his face, I *knew* he was special." He grabbed his sword and shield from the mound of books and clanged them together, filling the library with noise as he danced back and forth. "He was a Southling," cried Sigvald, rushing towards the giant. "Where exactly did he say he was from?"

Oddrún shook his head in disbelief. "Why does it matter?"

"Where was he from?" howled Sigvald, still grinning.

"I believe he said the city was called Altdorf."

"Altdorf," whispered Sigvald. "What a place that must be." He looked around at his ruined palace and shook his head. "I'm sick of this hovel," he said, storming across the room, booting open the door and heading back to the throne room.

The pandemonium grew as Sigvald reached the dais, clanging his sword against his shield and surveying his new subjects. One whole side of the throne room was now consumed by fire, and hundreds more of the giggling mutants were flooding into the room, eager to join the orgy of destruction. At the sight of Sigvald's jubilant face they howled in delight and pulled even more of the architecture to the ground: wrenching the masonry apart with their long talons and smashing chairs with their segmented tails.

Sigvald stood watching for a moment, overwhelmed; revelling in the sight of the gaudy creatures. Through the shattered doorways he glimpsed countless others, crawling and slithering towards him. By the end of the battle he had entranced anyone who could still draw breath, whether Norscan, Khornate or otherwise. He shook his head in amazement. The Decadent Host was more glorious than ever.

"My children," he cried, raising his voice above the din. "We've outgrown our home." He waved at the blazing portraits and shattered marble. "These walls have become a prison. We must head south."

The creatures exploded into a chorus of ecstatic screams, delighted that the prince was finally addressing them.

"I've learned of a city called Altdorf," he continued, trying to steady the laughter in his voice. "A city ripe for the taking, where we could indulge even

our most inventive desires. And with such a magnificent host at my back,” he waved his sword at the leering creatures, “*nothing* could stand in my way.”

A shroud of embers billowed around the prince as he lifted his rapier above his head, transporting his subjects into an even greater frenzy.

“I am Sigvald the Magnificent!” he cried, laughing wildly as the floor buckled beneath his feet. “Ride with me!”



EPILOGUE

Freydís awoke with a start, unsure where she was. Her side ached horribly from lying in a deep drift of snow and her hands and feet were tightly bound. As she peered into the dark she realised her head was covered in sackcloth. She shook herself, but the coarse material remained fixed firmly in place. Panic gripped her. Had Mord Huk taken her? She thought back to the battle, but after her embrace with Sigvald, nothing was clear. She could remember the Norscans' last charge, but then nothing.

"Sigvald?" she whispered, trying to stand. Her muscles were cramped and frozen and she toppled to her knees with a curse. "Is anybody there?" she cried, enraged by her own fear. There was no reply but the wind, howling across the ice. As she struggled into a sitting position, the hood moved slightly and she realised that there was a slit in the cloth, through which she could see a bank of glittering, moonlit snow and a single horse, silhouetted against the whiteness.

"Princess!" came a voice from the darkness.

She leant forward in confusion, thinking for a moment that the horse had spoken. The voice was thin and adenoidal, as though the speaker were holding his nose.

Then, after a few seconds, she saw a figure hurrying across the snow towards her.

"Who are you?" she snapped, straining against her bonds. "How can you leave me like this?"

As he approached, she saw that her captor was one of Sigvald's knights. He

was wearing tattered shreds of purple armour and had a longsword in his bloody fist. His face was freshly shaven and daubed with makeup, but there was no disguising the fact that he was close to death. His eyes stared wildly from their dark sockets and his skin was stretched horribly over his cadaverous head. There was also a swollen, purple mess in the middle of his face. At first the princess could not make out what it was, then she realised that the man's nose must have recently been broken.

"It's me," he laughed, as though they were sharing a friendly joke. "Gustav."

"Baron Schüler?" gasped Freydís, staring even harder at the man.

"Of course," he said, grinning wildly as he dropped down beside her.

She looked at him in shock. The baron was unrecognisable. Without his beard he looked even gaunter and also much younger. He resembled a consumptive child, delirious with fever.

"We're free, princess," he said, gripping her shoulders and revealing a mouthful of broken teeth.

As she looked into the baron's rolling eyes, Freydís saw no trace of sanity. The martial pride that had marked him out from Sigvald's other dupes was gone, replaced by the bright, manic stare of an addict.

"Why have you bound me, my love?" she replied, softening her voice.

His eyes narrowed. "I saw you with him," he said, tightening his grip and leaning closer to her. "I saw you with Sigvald. I know I have more to do before I can truly call you mine."

"What do you mean?" she replied, in an innocent voice. "Have you forgotten our night together? I carved my mark into your skin, Gustav. We are one."

The knight sighed and pressed his hand over his battered breastplate, savouring the memory. Then he laughed. "You're playing games with me," he chuckled, rising to his feet. "But I know now how I can make you mine. *Truly* mine." He looked south into the howling blizzard and raised his sword aloft. "Once we have returned to the Empire I will win your heart." He looked back at her, still grinning. His head was twitching slightly with excitement as he continued. "Finally I will have victory, Freydís. Victory! I have seen Sigvald's power and *understood* it. I understand *everything*."

Freydís felt a chill of fear. As the knight's tic grew more pronounced, it reminded her of her husband at his most delusional. Even the lunatic grin was the same.

"Baron," she snapped, drawing his attention back to her. She knew she had

only one hope of escape. “At least you could remove this sack.” She shook her head. “I can’t even see you properly, my love.”

The baron’s grin became a devious smirk and he shook his head. “Oh, no, princess. Not yet.” He dragged a trembling hand across his face and stared wildly back at her. “I must stay in control. Just until we reach Altdorf; then I can allow myself to savour your beauty.”

“Don’t be a fool,” snapped the princess. Then she lowered her voice and adopted a more demure tone. “Don’t be so cruel,” she said, leaning towards him. “How can you doubt my love?”

The baron did not seem to hear. He continued grinning as he lifted her from the ground and threw her over his shoulder, then carried her over to the horse and strapped her to the saddle.

“You’ll learn to love me,” he hissed, climbing into the saddle and kicking the horse into motion.

As they raced south, Freydis struggled against her bonds and howled furiously, but the baron’s only reply was laughter: a wild, hysterical sound that echoed in the dark, long after the horse had vanished from view.

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